This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07605134 5

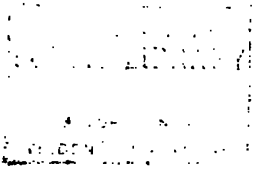
Penny

of Top Hill Trail

belle K. Maniates

Factor ( )

Penny of Top Hill Trail



THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

PENNY

of Top Hill Trail

By

Belle Kanaris Maniates

Author of

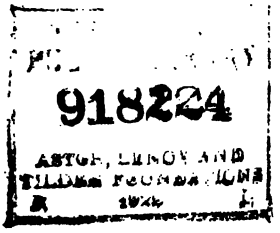
"Amarilly of Clothes-Line Alley,"
"Mildew Manse," etc.

Frontispiece by

Philip Lyford

The Reilly & Lee Co.

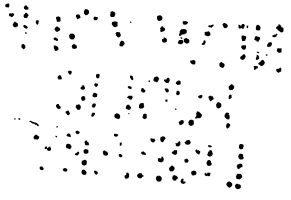
CHICAGO



Copyright, 1919
By
The Reilly & Lee Co.

All Rights Reserved

Made in U. S. A.



Penny of Top Hill Trail

Penny of Top Hill Trail

PENNY
of Top Hill Trail

CHAPTER I

On an afternoon in early spring a man lounged against the wall of the station waiting for the express from the east. Slender of waist and hip, stalwart of shoulder, some seventy-two inches of sinewy height, he was the figure of the typical cattleman. His eyes were deep-set and far-seeing; his lean, brown face, roughened by outdoor life, was austere and resolute in expression.

The train had barely stopped when a boyish-looking, lithe-limbed youth leaped from the platform. The blue serge suit and checked cap he wore did not disguise the fact that his working clothes — his field uniform — were those of a cow-puncher. A few quick strides brought him to the man in waiting.

"Hoped you'd be on hand to meet me,

Kurt, so I could get out to the ranch to-night. How's things up there?"

"Just the same as they were when you left, Jo," said the one addressed in whimsical tone. "You've only been gone ten days, you know."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Jo, following his companion through the depot. "City does age a man."

Gone are the days of The Golden West when spurred and revolvered horsemen sprang into saddles and loped out of the brush, or skimmed over matted mesquite on a buckboard drawn by swift-running ponies.

A long racing car was waiting for the two men and they were soon speeding over a hard-baked, steel-like road that led up, around and over the far-flung, undulating hills before them.

"I thought Kingdon's best car was worth a million bucks before I went to Chicago," said Joe critically, "but it sure would look like a two-spot on Michigan Avenue."

The other smiled indulgently.

"I trust everything out here won't suffer by comparison with the things you have seen during your journey."

"I should say not! It all looks pretty good to me. I wouldn't change this trail to Top Hill for all the boulevards and asphalts of Chicago, and our ranch-house has got any hotel I saw skinned by a mile for real living. I had *some* vacation, though, and it was mighty good of you to send me on that business. I 'tended to it, all right as soon as I got there, before I took in any of the sights or let loose for my 'time.' I won't forget it in you, Kurt — to send me instead of going yourself."

"Well, Jo, you'd been cooped up here a long time for a youngster," said Kurt, laying a hand on the younger man's shoulder, "and I saw you were rarin' for a little recreation. I thought you would settle down to a hard season's work if you let out a little. I received your report and check. You man-

aged that cattle deal very shrewdly. Kingdon was much pleased."

"That's encouraging, but I feel better at pleasing you, Kurt."

They rode on without talking for some distance. From time to time Kurt cast a searching glance at the young man whose eyes shone with a strange, steady light — a look of exaltation and despair combined.

The car slowed down to conversational need.

What 'tis, Jo? Did you come to grief when you 'let loose?' Let go all your earnings in one big game without any way-slips, or did you have such a round of theatres, cabarets and night-life that you are feeling the depression of reaction?"

"You're guessing wrong," replied Jo quietly. "I know that's the way most of us grass-fed men act when we get a chance at white lights. I had a beautiful time that was as short and as far off as a pleasant dream. As I said, I started out for a regular time,

but I didn't take a drink, or touch a card, or — say, Kurt, I think I'd like to tell you about it! I know you won't kid me, for I'm in earnest and — in trouble."

Another quick glance at the blue eyes, usually so brimming with sparkling gayety but which were now serious and despondent, brought a transformation to the grim face of the older man, making him look kinder, warmer, younger.

"Shoot, Jo!" was all he said, but the lad felt that the crude word was backed up by a real interest, a readiness to hear and advise.

"Some one gave me a steer to a dance place," he began. "Hurricane Hall, I think it was called, and as soon as I looked in, I saw it was tougher even than a cowboy's cravings called for; but I sort of stuck around until I happened to look at one of the tables over in a cornered-off place. A little girl was sitting there alone, different from all those other fierce-looking ones who were dressed in high water skirts and with waists

that looked as if they needed inside blinds to get by.

"She had on a white dress, a real dress — not a skirt and bib — that covered her, and without much fixings. Her hair was drawn back plain like a kid's. I knew right off she'd got in wrong, and I thought it was up to me to get her out of that joint.

"I went over to her and said: 'Excuse my nerve, little girl, but I guess you're in the wrong pew.'

"She looked at me sort of funny; then she smiled and said: 'Same to you!'

"Her voice sounded like low, soft music — contralto kind.

"'Yes;' I said. 'You're right. I'm a cowboy, not a country boy, and I'm in Chicago to see the sights; but I'd ask for blinders if I stayed around here much longer. Who brought you here?'

"'Nobody,' she said, looking down. 'I came by myself.'

"'I'm glad of it,' I tell her, 'and I'm the

guy that's going to take you away from here.'

"'Why?' she asked me, 'and how do you know I'll go with you.'

"She'd kept her eyes away from me all this time. I said: 'Look at me.'

"She did. Right at me, the way kids do — not bold — just curious. Good night! It did something to my heart when her eyes looked into mine that way.

"'Can you trust me?' I asked after a minute.

"'Yes,' she said; and I knew she meant it.

"'I want to dance with you,' I told her, 'but I don't want to do it here.'

"'Where can we go?' she asked.

"'I know a man in Chicago,' I said, 'who has asked me to come to his place. It ain't stylish enough for you, but it's run right and respectable. It ain't very far from here. Reilly's. Know it?'

"'I've heard of it,' she said, 'but I've never been there.'

"Of course she hadn't. I'd seen right off she was just a kid and hadn't been around to places.

"'Will you go there with me now?' I asked her.

"'Yes;' she said. 'I know you're all right.'

"Maybe I wasn't feeling good when I'd got her out of there and steered her through the streets! She was a little mite of a thing, and young, but very quiet; her eyes had a sad look.

"We went to Reilly's: He was up here in the hill country once for a vacation — the time you were out on the coast. We fellows gave him some time, and he liked it fine. Well, he told us the place was ours. The music was great, and we started right out on the floor. Say! I was feeling as fit and stepping as lively as if I had had a million drinks, but I hadn't had one. There was no getting around it. That little girl in her white dress had landed me one right over

the heart. She slipped into my arms as quick as she had into my heart, too. I danced the way I felt, and she — well, she was right with me every time: the slickest little stepper I ever saw. Not dance-mad, like those professional kind; she let me set the pace and she followed any lead.

"Reilly came up to us on the floor and offered to introduce us to folks. I asked him if he remembered the time I gave him out west, and he said he could never forget it and he was now aiming to return it best he knew how. 'Take it from me,' I said, 'that I can get right returns from you if you'll not give any other fellow the chance to butt in on these dances.' 'I'm on,' he said, and he let us alone.

"We danced every time without talking any. When it came closing time, Reilly came up again and said: 'This is the hour we quit, but it don't mean for my guests. Come back in this little room and have refreshments on me.'

"He showed us into a little ring-around-the-rosy room with lights half off and asks: 'What'll you have?'

"'Coffee,' I said quickly and warningly, and the kid said: 'I'll have the same.'

"Reilly laughed — because I took coffee, I suppose. We got it good and hot, with sandwiches and pickles thrown in. Then we talked. Someway she got me to do most of the talking. She wanted to hear all about ranches and cowboys and me. Her eyes got bright, and she said it was better than movies, and she wished she could see my country. I told her she would, because I was going to take her there. She didn't say anything to that. Pretty soon Reilly comes in and tells me he wants to give us the best time he knows how all right, but were we planning to stay to breakfast? When I saw what time it was, I took the hint and we got right up. I asked him what there was to pay, and he said if I tried to pay, I'd have to do it over his dead body. We went out into the night, only 'twas

morning. I asked her what her folks would say.

"'I have no folks,' she said kind of sad-like.

"That made me feel good.

"'I am glad of that,' I told her, 'because I want you all to myself.'

"Then I thought she must be working, and I told her I was sorry to have kept her up so late because she'd be too tired to go to work. She said she was out of a job, but was expecting something soon.

"'I am glad of that, too,' I said.

"She looked sort of surprised, so I knew I'd been too sudden, but you see, time was short with me. I told her I'd be in Chicago another twenty-four hours and would she help show me around. I had never been on one of the big boats and Reilly had told me about a fine tour to take to some Saint place. She knew where he meant, though she had never been there. She said folks who lived in Chicago didn't go outside much. They

left the trips for visitors. She promised to meet me at the dock in a few hours.

"She wouldn't let me go all the way home with her. She said she had reasons, and made me leave her on a corner which she said was quite close to where she lived. It was an awful poor part of the city, and I suppose she didn't want me to know how humble her home was. As if I cared for that! It was so near light I knew she would be safe, but I stood there on guard for a few minutes after she left.

"Believe me, I was right on time at the dock, and she came soon after I did. She had on a plain, dark suit, neat, little shoes, and a hat down over her eyes like the girls in movies wear. I'd passed a corner on the way to the boat where they sold flowers. There were some violets that looked like her. I bought a big bunch and when I gave them to her, she sort of gasped and said no one had ever bought flowers for her before. I was glad to hear that. I asked her hadn't

she ever had a fellow, and she said she hadn't. I told her I couldn't see why, unless it was because she didn't want one. She looked up at me sort of shy and said she might have had one most any time, but that there had never been one she cared for before.

"I could have hugged her right there on the dock for that 'before,' but it was time for the boat to start. There weren't many going. It was early in the season, she said. We went up on deck and sat by the rail and maybe old Lake Michigan didn't look sparkling! Everything looked sparkling to me. She was as happy as a kid with a new doll, because she had never been on a boat before. When we got to the place — St. Joe, she said it was — there were all sorts of things to do that beat Chicago all to bits for a good time. There was a big sandy beach that made me want to go in the water, but she said it was too early. So we sat in the sun-warmed sand and watched the waves, and we got our pictures taken, and tried a Wheel of Fortune.

We went to a big hotel and had a good dinner, though they didn't have any of the things that were down on their program. The waiter said it was a bill of fare left over from last year. We didn't mind that. After dinner we rode out to a place to see some guys that looked like pictures in the Old Testament. They lived in David's House, too.

"It was an awfully short afternoon someway. We had supper at the hotel and took the boat home. What few passengers there were besides us stayed shut up in the cabin, so we had the deck and the light of the new moon all to ourselves.

"She shivered a little, but I had brought an extra coat, because I had seen Reilly before I went and he told me to take one. I wrapped her up in it, and when I buttoned it around her chin, I did what I'd been aching to do since I first met her, but had slipped on my courage. She was looking down in a shy, little way she has — and I kissed her. When she lifted her eyes, there was such a

surprised little look in them, I felt just as if I had hurt a baby.

"'I didn't mean to do it,' I said, 'but I couldn't help it. Will you forgive me?'

"'I'll forgive you,' she said in a low voice after a moment, 'but you mustn't — again.'

"She meant it, so I didn't, but she let me hold her hand and we sat quiet and watched the moon-shine on the water.

"I asked her if she'd had a good time, and she told me it had been the most wonderful day of her life — different from all others.

"'Honest?' I asked.

"She didn't answer, but looked off over the water, and I saw a tear on her cheek.

"'Honest?' I said again.

"'Yes;' she said. '*Honest,* and I never knew before what it was to be honest.'

"I didn't know what she meant, but we had got to Chicago now. It wasn't very late and I asked her should we go to Reilly's again, and she said it would spoil the day. I thought so, too. On the way to where I'd left her the

night before, there was a little park. We went in and sat on one of the benches. It was only a little clump of trees, but it made a nice place to visit, because there was no one around. People in cities don't act like they were seasoned to outdoors except when it's hot weather.

"I was booked to leave the next morning, so I couldn't let any grass grow. I asked her to marry me.

"'I wish you hadn't asked me,' she said, and her voice sounded like there were tears in her eyes.

"'Why?' I asked.

"'I wish,' she went on without taking any notice of me — just like she was talking to herself — 'that I dared love a man like you.'

"That was all I cared to know. For the ghost of a second I held her in my arms, but she slipped out of them, and I saw her face was pale.

"'You *do* love me!' I said.

"'I do,' she repeated after me. 'A lot.

If it was a little bit, I'd marry you, but I love you so much, I'll tell you why I can never marry you. You're the first man that ever treated me like I was white. I'm pretty bad, I know, but I am not so bad as to do you wrong.'

"I told her I didn't know what she meant, but there was nothing in the world that should come between us.

"'I tried to tell you to-night on the boat, when you asked me to tell you how much I had enjoyed the day,' she went on just as though I hadn't spoken, 'when you said "*Honest.*" But I couldn't. I was afraid to tell you I couldn't do anything *honest.*'

"Then she told me she was a thief. She didn't try to make any excuses for herself, but when I heard her little hard luck story and knew what she'd always been up against, I didn't wonder that she stole or committed any crime. She had had a regular Cinderella step-mother who had licked her when she was a kid because she took food from the

pantry when she was hungry. The old hag called it stealing and warned the school teacher, and the other kids got hold of it and of course you know what it does to any one to get a black eye. She had the name of a thief wished on her until she got to be one. She was expelled from school; put in a reformatory; ran away; stole to keep herself alive. Then they all took a hand at her — ministers, society girls, charitable associations; they gave her a bum steer and made her feel she was a hopeless outcast, so she felt more at home with the vagrant class. The only person who had ever made her feel she wanted to be straight was a Salvation Army woman, but she had gone away and no one was left to care now.

"I didn't let her go any further. I told her *I* cared and I cared all the more since I had heard her story; and that she *was* honest, or she wouldn't have told me about herself. What did I care what she had been or done? Her life was going to begin right then with

me. I couldn't budge her. I talked and pleaded, and at last she gave in — a little. She said she'd think it over and meet me at the little park in the morning, and then she'd talk some more about it.

"So we parted until morning came. But I made up my mind that if she wouldn't consent, I'd simply kidnap her and bring her up here to Mrs. Kingdon.

"I was on hand bright and early at the park next morning, and after a while a slovenly slip of a girl came up to me and asked my name. I told her. She gave me a note and then started off like a skyrocket, but I'm some spry myself and I caught her and held her till I'd read the note. It was from her and she said she couldn't give me the worst of the bargain. That she was going to try hard to see if she could make good and live without stealing, and when she was sure, she'd send word to me through Mr. Reilly, and if I never heard, I could know she had failed and for me to forget her.

"'Where is she?' I asked the girl, who was squirming like an eel.

"'I dunno,' she said. 'She's left town.'

"'I don't believe it!' I said.

"'Yes, she has,' said the girl. 'She pawned all her togs — that new white dress and the swell shoes and her new suit and hat to get money to make a getaway.'

"I might as well have tried to hang on to a fish as to hold that slippery little street Arab. She broke away and ran. I was after her, but it was no use. She knew the inns and outs of the alleys like a rat and I lost her. You see, I didn't know my girl's last name. When I asked her, she said: 'Call me Marta.' I didn't care about knowing her last name then, because I was so keen to give her my own name.

"I was just about crazy. I hunted all over the part of the city where I'd left her the first night. Then I went to see Reilly, but he didn't know who she was. I made him see what it meant to me to find her, and he

promised to try his best and to forward at once any letter that came to him. If I don't hear after a while, when work gets slack so you can spare me, I'm going to Chicago and go through it with a fine tooth comb. Reilly will help me follow every girl by the name of Marta that's ever lived there."

Kurt's eyes, full of infinite pity and regret, turned to Jo as he broke the little pause that followed.

"She is doubtless a poor little stray of a girl and luck has been against her, but, Jo, put all thoughts of marrying her away, just as she has. Wait — " he hurried on, seeing the anger kindling in the lad's eyes — "if it were any other offense — But a thief! 'Once a thief, always a thief,' is the truest saying I know. Your love couldn't — "

"It didn't make any change in my feelings when she told me," said Joe stanchly. "She could steal anything I had."

"It might not change your feelings, but it should change your intentions. Do you mean

you'd marry — " Kurt had an incredulous expression on his face.

" In a second, if she'd have me. I'd buy her everything she wanted so she wouldn't have to steal."

" But after you were married and people found out what she was, you'd be ashamed — "

" Ashamed! I'd put my little thief on a throne, and whoever dared to try to take her off would get it in the neck."

The car speeded up again. The man at the wheel saw the utter futility of further expostulation.

" I'll leave it to time and cow-punching," he thought sagely. " Time and work are the best healers, especially for the young. Preaching is of no avail."

Night came on. Jo looked up at a little lone star which was trying to make its light shine without a properly darkened background.

" That's a poor little orphan star — like

her. I'll look for it every night now. I wish I hadn't blabbed to Kurt. He hasn't a nose for orange blossoms."

In the fortnight that followed, Jo worked indefatigably, but his heart and his thoughts were back in Chicago, except when now and then his eyes turned to a fertile little beauty-spot valleyed between the hills. For here he had located an imaginary cottage — his cottage and hers. This mirage, of course, always showed a little slip of a girl standing in the doorway. To the surprise and dismay of his associates Jo the spender became Jo the saver that his dream might come true.

He offered no addendum to the revelation he had made to Kurt. They met often, but in ranch life discourse is not frequent, and Jo instinctively felt that his recital of Love's Young Dream had fallen upon unsympathetic ears, while the foreman, unversed in the Language of Love, was mystified by the lad's silence.

Three weeks later the " man without a nose

for orange blossoms" was again in town. As acting sheriff of the county lately, Kurt had dropped in to see the jailer.

"How's business, Bender? Any new boarders?" he asked.

"Yes; a gal run in for stealing. Didn't find the goods on her; but she's a sly one with the record of being a lifelong thief. She strayed up here from Chicago."

"What's her name?" he asked casually.

"Marta Sills."

"I wonder if it could be Jo's Marta," the acting sheriff thought suddenly. "She may have followed him up here."

He walked back to the hotel, trying to decide whether he should tell Jo. If she should prove to be his girl, her arrest up here should show him that his love hadn't worked the miracle he expected. Jo had been a little more quiet since his return, but he gave no signs of pining away, and maybe if nothing revived his interest, it might die a natural death. The story Jo had told him of the little

waif had made a deep impression upon him, however.

"Poor little brat!" he thought. "What chance does her kind have? I suppose I ought to give her one. There is one person in the world who might be able to reform her, and I'd put her in that person's charge if it weren't for wrecking Jo's life."

All through the afternoon while transacting the business that had brought him to town, his heart and his head were having a wrestling match, the former being at the disadvantage of being underworked.

"I'll go up and take a look at her," he suddenly decided. "Maybe I can tell from Jo's description whether she is his Marta or not."

On his way to the jail he was accosted by a big, jovial man.

"Don't know where I can get an extra helper, do you, Kurt? Simpson, my right-hand, has gone back to Canada to enlist."

"How providential!" thought Kurt.

"Why, yes; Mr. Westcott," he replied:

"We're well up with our work, and I could spare Jo Gary for a few weeks."

"Jo Gary! May Heaven bless you! When can I get him?"

"Going out home now?"

"Yes; on my way."

"Stop at the ranch and take him along with you. Tell him I said to go. It'll be all right with Kingdon."

Westcott renewed his blessings upon Kurt and drove on.

At the jail Kurt looked in on the latest arrival. She was sitting at a table in Bender's back office, her head bowed in her hands. There was something appealing in the drooping of her shoulders and in her shabby attire.

"Now Jo is disposed of, she shall have her chance, anyway," he decided.

Without speaking to the girl, he sought Bender and they held a brief consultation.

CHAPTER II

"Aren't we going to stop at all, Mr. Sheriff Man?"

A soft, plaintive note in the voice made Kurt Walters turn the brake of an old, rickety automobile and halt in the dust-white road, as he cast a sharply scrutinizing glance upon the atom of a girl who sat beside him. She was a dejected, dusty, little figure, drooping under the jolt of the jerking car and the bright rays of hills-land sunshine. She was young — in years; young, too, in looks, as Kurt saw when she raised her eyes which were soft and almond-shaped; but old, he assumed, in much that she should not have been.

She had found it a long, hard ride across the plains, and the end of her endurance had been prefaced by frequent sighs, changes of position and softly muffled exclamations, all

seemingly unnoted by the man beside her, whose deep-set eyes had remained fixed on the open space ahead, his slim, brown hands gripping the wheel, his lean, sinewy body bending slightly forward.

His tenseness relaxed; a startled, remorseful look came into his eyes as he saw two tears coursing down her cheeks. They were unmistakably real tears, — though, as he was well aware, they came from physical causes alone. Still, they penetrated the armor of unconcern with which he had girded himself.

"What for?" he asked curtly.

"What for!" she echoed, her mouth quivering into pathetic droops. "For rest, of course. You may be used to this kind of locomotion, but I'm not very well upholstered, and I'm shaken to bits. Fact is, I'm just all pegged out, old man. Have a heart, and stop for repairs. What's your rush, anyway? I can't get loose hereabouts, and I haven't anywhere to go, anyhow. Didn't mind getting 'took' at all, at all. How many

more miles is it to the end of your trail? This is a trail, isn't it?"

"A great many miles," he replied, "and it was on your account more than any other that I was hurrying to get to the —"

"Jail," she answered supinely, as he hesitated.

"No," he said grimly. "I was going to take you home — for to-night, anyway."

"Home! Oh, how you startle me! I didn't know there was any of those home-stuff places left except in the movies. I never was much stuck on home, so you needn't be afraid to call it 'jail' for fear of hurting my feelings."

"You can't work on my sympathy that way," he said coldly.

"Dear me!" she replied with a silly, little giggle. "I gave up trying to work the sympathy racket long ago. Everyone's too smart nowadays. Honest, I've no longings for home. I feel sorry for anyone who's tied down to one. Why don't you kick over the

traces and come off your trail and see what's on the other side of your hills? I'd hate to take root here. Say, Mr. Sheriff Man, you look a good sort, even if you have played you were deaf and dumb for the whole of this awful ride. Let's sidetrack the trail and go — home — by moonlight."

His eyes remained rigid and relentless, but there was a slight twitching of his strongest feature, the wide, mobile mouth.

He looked at his watch.

"We can wait for a few minutes," he said in a matter of fact voice.

"Please, may I get out and stretch?" she asked pleadingly.

Taking silence for consent, she climbed out of the car.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked, as he poured some water from an improvised Thermos bottle into a traveling cup.

"Thanks for those first kind words," she exclaimed, taking the cup from him and drinking eagerly.

"Why didn't you say you were thirsty?" he asked in a resentful tone, without looking at her. He had, in fact, studiously refrained from looking at her throughout the journey.

"I'm not used to asking for anything," she answered with a chuckle. "I take what comes my way. 'Taking' is your job, too, isn't it?"

"To hell with my job!" he broke out fiercely. "I'd never have taken it if I knew it meant this."

"It's your own fault," she retorted. "It wouldn't have been 'this' if you hadn't been so grouchy. We could have had a chummy little gabfest, if you hadn't been bunging holes in the landscape with your lamps all the way."

He made no response but began to examine the workings of his car.

"Does the county furnish it to you?" she asked. "It doesn't seem as if you'd pick out anything like this. Was it 'Made in America?' Funny outfit for a cowboy country, anyway."

"Get in," he commanded curtly. "We must be away."

"Oh, please, not yet," she implored. "It's so awful hot, and I won't have all this outdoors for a long time, I suppose. I see there's a tidy little bit of shade yonder. Let's go there and rest awhile. I'll be good; honest, I will, and when I get rested, you can hit a faster gait to even up. I get tired just the same as honest folks do. Come, now, won't you?"

In a flash she had taken advantage of this oasis of shade that beckoned enticingly to the passer-by.

He followed reluctantly.

"This is Heaven let loose," she said, lolling luxuriously against the trunk of a tree. "You're the only nice sheriff man that ever run me in."

He sat down near her and looked gloomily ahead.

"Cheer up!" she urged, after a short silence. "It may not be so bad. Any one

would think you were the prisoner instead of poor little me."

"I wish I were," he said shortly.

She looked at him curiously.

"Say, what's eating you, anyway? If you hate your job so, what did you take it for?"

"It was forced on me. I'm only sworn in as acting sheriff for the county until the sheriff returns."

"How long you been 'it'?"

"Two weeks. You're my second — arrest."

"Who was the first?"

"So Long Sam."

She sat upright.

"Are you the man who caught So Long Sam? Every one has been afraid to tackle him. I'd never have thought it of you!"

"Why?" he asked curiously, not proof against the masculine enjoyment of hearing himself analyzed in spite of his reluctance to talk to her. "Do I seem such a weakling I couldn't take one man?"

"No; you look like you'd take a red-hot

stove if you wanted to; but they said — Say; is your maiden name 'Kurt?' No! It can't be."

"Why not?"

"Because they called the man who took So Long Sam, 'Kind Kurt.' You haven't been over-kind to me till just lately. Whirling me over sands in that awful fore-shortened car."

"It must be better," he said dryly, "than the kind you've been used to."

"You mean the jail jitney. Do you know, they never yet put me in one. Always conveyed me other ways. Weren't so bad to me either. I guess maybe your heart is in the right place or you wouldn't have let me rest and given me the drink, even if you did wait till the eleventh hour. Can't you look pleasant like you were going to sit for a picture to give to your best girl instead of posing for 'Just before the battle, Mother'? You look so sorry you came."

"I am," he said angrily. "I guess 'Kind

Kurt ' is a blankety blank fool, as some people say. I've been a lot kinder to you than you know. When I heard of your case and Bender pointed you out to me and said he'd got you locked up, I thought you were one of the many young city girls who go wrong because they have no chance to know better. The kind bred in slums, ignorant, ill-fed — the kind who never had a fair show. So I resolved that you should have one. Bender wanted you out of town with the surety that you would never come back.

"I felt sorry for you. I offered to take you off his hands and bring you out here among the hills, where the best woman in the world would teach you to *want* to be honest. Do you suppose I'd have done it if I'd known the kind you are — a bright, smart brat who is bad because she wants to be, and boasts of it? There is no hope for your kind."

It was the longest speech the acting sheriff had ever made. He had been scarcely conscious that he was talking, but was simply

voicing what had been in his thoughts for the last half hour.

"How old is this 'best woman in the world'?" asked the girl, seemingly unconcerned in his summing up of her case. "Is she your sweetheart or your wife? If she is either one, you'd better take me back to Bender, or spill me out on the plains here. She won't be real glad to try to reform a young, good-looking girl like me. I *am* good-looking, honest, if I was slicked up a little."

He looked away, an angry frown on his lean, strong face. She gazed at him curiously for a moment and then laid a slim, brown hand on his arm.

"Listen here, Kurt," she said. "You were right in what you thought about me never having had a fair show. Everything, everyone, including myself, seems to have been against me. I was born with 'taking ways.' I couldn't seem to live them down. Lately things have been going wrong awfully fast. I've been sick and no one acted as if I were

human up to a short time ago. I didn't know that was why you took me from Bender's jail. Honest, I'm not so bad as I talk."

He looked at her sceptically. Her eyes, now turned from him, were soft, feminine and without guile. He wouldn't let himself be hoodwinked.

"No; there's no excuse for you," he declared emphatically. "You are educated. You could have earned an honest living. You didn't have to steal."

"No;" she said slowly and thoughtfully. "I didn't have to."

"Then why do you? Bender told me you had a life-long record of pilfering."

"Life-long! Kind Kurt, I am young — only twenty."

"He said you'd been given a chance over and over again, but that you were hopeless. I — think you are."

"I think so, too," she acknowledged, with a little giggle that brought back his scowl. "You've got a white elephant on your hands,

Kurt. What are you going to do with me?"

"There's only one thing I can do, now," he said glumly. "Carry out a bad bargain. I'll see it through."

"Oh, Mr. Britling!" she murmured *sotto voce.*

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Traveling libraries evidently don't hit this trail. What is it the trail to, anyway? Your house?"

"To Top Hill Tavern."

"Gee! That sounds good. A tavern! I hope it's tiptop as well as tophill. How did you come to build a hotel way off here? Summer boarders? Will there be dances?"

"Top Hill Tavern," he said coldly, "is the name of a ranch — not mine. The owners live there."

"And does she, 'the best woman in the world,' live there?"

"We must start now," he said, rising abruptly and leading the way to the car.

"I should think," remarked the girl cas-

ually after his fourth ineffectual effort to start the engine, "that if she owns a ranch, she might buy a better buzz wagon than this."

He made no reply, but renewed his futile attempts at starting, muttering words softly the while.

"Don't be sore, Kurt. I can't help it because your old ark won't budge. I didn't steal anything off it. Wouldn't it be fierce if you were marooned on the trail with a thief who has a life-long record!"

He came around the car and stood beside her. His face was flushed. His eyes, of the deep-set sombre kind that grow larger and come to the surface only when strongly moved, burned with the light of anger.

"Did anyone ever try whipping you, I wonder?"

"Sure," she said cheerfully. "I was brought up on whippings by a — stepmother. But do you feel that way toward me? You look like a man who might strike a woman under certain provocation, perhaps; but not

like one who would hit a little girl like me. If you won't look so cross, I'll tell you why your 'mobile won't move."

He made no reply, but turned to the brake.

"Say, 'bo," she continued tantalizingly, "whilst you are a lookin', just cast your lamps into the gasoline tank. That man who filled it didn't put a widow's mite in."

Unbelievingly he followed this lead.

"Not a drop, damn it!"

"The last straw with you, isn't it? I'm not to blame, though. If you think I stole your gasoline, just search me. How far are we from your tiptop tavern?"

"Twenty miles. I suppose you couldn't walk it," he said doubtfully.

"Me? In these?" she exclaimed, thrusting forth a foot illy and most inadequately shod. "But you can walk on."

"No;" he refused. "You don't put one over on me in that way."

"You know I couldn't walk back to town."

"Some one might come along in a car."

"Wouldn't you trust me, if I gave you my word to wait for you?"

"The word of —"

"A thief," she finished. "All right. I'm in no hurry. What are you going to do?"

"We'll wait here until some one comes along."

"Then let's go back to the trees while we wait," she proposed, climbing out of the car and taking a small box from the seat.

"Didn't Bender have one tiny good word for me?" she asked as they sat down in the welcome shade.

"He said stealing was the only offence you'd been up for, and he guessed you couldn't help it. What was your little game in making him think you were stupid?"

"Did he say I was? Horrid thing! I'm glad I put one over on him and lifted this," and she held up the box.

"What is it?" he demanded sternly.

"His supper. A peroxided wife brought it to him — just before he presented me to

you. It'll come in handy now, or won't you partake of stolen goods?"

"I'll pay him for it the next time I see him."

"Shucks, Kurt! You got such a bad bargain when you drew me, you ought to have something thrown in. It's all done up in a nice napkin — looks as if it would taste good. Oh, what a feast! Pork sandwiches, deviled eggs, dills, a keep-hot bottle of coffee, layer cake and pie. Bender knew how to pick a partner. What shall we drink out of?"

He produced a drinking cup, poured some coffee in it and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said. "Shall we make it a loving cup, Kurt?"

He ignored her question and plunged greedily into a pork sandwich. He had had so much business in town that day, he had taken no time to eat.

The girl partook of Bender's pilfered luncheon sparingly and without zest.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked her pres-

ently, his temper disappearing as his appetite was appeased.

"No; it's a long time since I've been hungry."

"What did you steal this food for then?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do. It was because that Bender woman gave me such a once-over, and decided I was the scum of the earth. Is that the way your topside tavern woman will look at me?"

"No;" he replied earnestly. "She's made a woman out of worse than you."

"Thanks!" she said, folding the napkin neatly. "I thought you had my number for the worst ever. It's wonderful what food will do for a man. Hope she will let me stay at the top of the hill while I get an appetite. The doctor said I didn't need medicine — just the right kind of food, rest and good air. I wouldn't have got them, maybe, but for you, and I suppose I haven't been very grateful."

Her tone was low and wistful. A look she

hadn't seen before — a kindly, sympathetic look — leapt to his eyes and softened the harshness of his features.

"Have you been sick, real sick?" he asked.

"Yes; clean played out, the doctor said."

"Then I am glad I brought you. We will make you well physically, anyway."

"And maybe the other will follow?"

"It will, if you will try to do right. Will you?"

"Sure. I've always tried — most always. I can't be very bad up at the top of a hill, unless I get lonesome. You'd better tell that 'best woman' to double-lock things. It's with stealing the same as with drinking — if anything you crave is lying around handy, good-bye to good resolutions."

"I'll see to that. I'm a sheriff, remember."

"Look, sheriff!"

With a mocking smile, she held up a watch.

"I took that off you slick as anything when you passed the coffee. It was like taking candy from a baby."

Anger at her nerve and chagrin that he had been so neatly tricked kept him silent.

"It's not altogether a habit," she continued in mock apology; "it's a gift."

"Jo got her number wrong," he thought. "She was just playing him with her sad, nice, little-girl manner. For his sake, I'll see that they don't meet. I wonder just why she is playing this role with me?"

"You might give me credit for returning your ticker," she said in abused tone.

"I never knew but one other person," he said coolly, "that affected me as unpleasantly as you do."

"Who was that?" she asked interestedly.

"A cow-puncher — Centipede Pete."

"Some name! Why don't you ask me my name, Kurt? Don't look so contemptuous. I am going to tell you, because it doesn't sound like me. It's Penelope."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, with something like a groan in his voice.

"Nobody can help her name," she com-

plained. "Don't you like it? I kind of thought it would suit you, because it doesn't sound like me. Sort of suggests respectability, don't you think?"

"It was my mother's name," he replied tensely, as he walked a few paces away.

Night that comes so fleetly in this country dropped like a veil.

The girl followed him.

"I didn't steal that — your mother's name, you know, Kurt," she said in an odd, confiding voice. "They gave it to me, you see, and maybe it will help that I've never been called by it. They used to call me Pen or Penny — a bad penny, I suppose you think."

"Your name," he said frigidly, "or at least the one Bender knows you by — the one you went by in Chicago, is Marta Sills."

She made an articulate sound suggestive of dismay.

"That is one of my names," she admitted. "I had forgotten I gave that one to Bender."

He made no comment.

"You said," she continued pleadingly, "that there was no excuse for me and girls like me. Maybe you would find one if you knew what we are up against. Every one knocks instead of boosts, and tells us how low-down we are. Just as if a mirror were held up to an ugly-looking girl, and she were asked how anyone who looked like that could expect to be different. Suppose I should tell you I'd been to reformatories and places where I had learned that I must play the stupid act as I did with Bender so as to be kept from being sent up. There is no mercy for those who exhibit any glimpses of intelligence, you see. This time I thought I was a goner for life until you pried me loose. All doors seemed closed, but you opened the window. No one was ever really kind to me before, except a Salvation Army woman and — some one else."

"What was the name of that some one else?" he interrupted.

She hesitated, and for the first time seemed confused.

"Was it," he demanded, "*Jo Gary?*"

"Oh!" she gasped. Then quickly recovering, she continued: "You're quite a detective for an acting one. If you were the real thing, you'd be a regular Sherlock Holmes and make a clean sweep of crooks."

"Answer my question."

"It doesn't seem necessary to tell you anything; you know so much. I seem to know that name. Was he at a dance in Chicago — let me see, Hurricane Hall?" she asked serenely. "Is this his part of the country, and shall I see him?"

"It *was* his part of the country. You can *not* see him."

A wistful note crept into her voice as she said:

"I should like to see him just once, but I suppose you won't tell me where he is. I don't dare let on to you how grateful I really feel to you, because I might lose my nerve and I've just got to hang on to that. It's my only asset in trade. We have to use lots of

bluff. Besides, someway you make me feel contrary. Maybe I am the lightning and you the thunder."

"Why did you leave Chicago?" he asked abruptly. "Bender said that was where you drifted from. I want the real reason — the absolute truth."

It was very dark now, but she could feel his eyes, as piercing as search lights, demanding the truth.

"The gate was open and I just walked out, or maybe I stole out. I didn't follow Jo, because he didn't say where he lived — just the hill country. I'll tell you the real reason — thieves don't always lie — I had been sick and the doctor said air like this for mine, and so I followed this trail. I picked it up here and I'd have been all right if I hadn't run up against that lightning-chaser of a Bender. I guess folks are keener out this way than they are in the cities. More time to hunt crooks, maybe."

"No;" he denied. "It isn't that. It's

because we have a beautiful, clean country and we are going to — "

"Have no blots on the landscape," she interrupted. " I suppose Bender catches them and you reform them. Is that the system? Well, no one can be good till they are comfortable. I'm not very strong yet, and I'm not used to being out untethered like this. I'm cold and sleepy. If you don't object, I'll crawl into your old wagon if I can find it in the dark."

She caught a note of contrition in a muffled exclamation.

" Wait! "

She heard him walk on to the car and come back. Then she felt a coat wrapped snugly about her.

He guided her to the clumps of trees and spread a robe on the ground.

" Sit down here," he said peremptorily.

She gave a little smile of victory which, if he had seen it, would have strangled all his new-born compassion.

"Why didn't you tell me your story in the first place?" he demanded.

"When you are out in the world alone, you know," she said sagely, "and everyone is taking a shot at you, you have to put out a bluff of bravado, same as a porcupine shoots out his quills."

He gave another murmur of sympathy.

"Don't feel too bad about it, Kind Kurt, because being knocked about sharpens your wits and makes you an expert dodger when you aren't equal to fighting in the open."

Suddenly into the black-purple sky shot forth a moon and stars.

"Makes the white lights of a city look like thirty cents, eh, Kurt?" she commented.

He made no response, and she was serenely aware of his silent disapproval.

"What's matter, Kurt?"

"My name," he replied frigidly, "is Walters."

"Is it, then? And what might your middle name be?"

"You can call me 'Mr. Walters,'" he replied, striving for dignity and realizing instantly how lame was the attempt.

"Oh, can I now? Well, I'll do nothing of the kind to the first real friend I've ever had. As I said, I am all in, and I'm going to snooze while you watch for a gasoliner to come along."

She stretched herself out and closed her eyes. In a semi-slumber she was dreamily conscious of a firm roll slipped deftly under her head. She made a faint murmur of content and acknowledgment and knew no more. Her sleeping sense didn't tell her that a tall sheriff came and looked down upon her small, pale, moonlit face from which sleep, the great eliminator, had robbed of everything earthy and left it the face of an innocent, sleeping child. She didn't dream that as he gazed he remitted sentence and told himself that she was but a stray little kitten lost in the wide plains of life, and solely in need of patient guidance to a home hearth.

"She was right," he confessed. "I did make her feel contrary. It seems to be a characteristic of mine. Maybe her true little self is the one Jo saw and she can be made worthy of him yet."

CHAPTER III

When the first faint edges of light outlined the coming day, she sat bolt upright and stared about her. As far as eye could see was the tortuous trail leading up sculptured hills that were the preface to the mother mountains of the West.

The wonder-stare in her eyes gradually disappeared as memory awakened. Down beyond the trees in a little valley the sheriff was attending to a fire he had built.

She arose, cramped and unrefreshed, and hastened toward the welcome blaze.

"Good morning. Any gasoline yet?"

"No; not an automobile passed during the night."

"How do you know? Didn't you sleep?"

"No."

"Guarding your car and me? No!" she added quickly. "That wasn't the reason. I

had all the robes and your coat. You had to stay awake to keep warm."

He smiled slightly and spoke in the hushed voice that seems in keeping with the dawn.

"I've been used to night watches — tending sheep and cattle on the plains. What's the difference whether it's night or day so long as you sleep somewhere in the twenty-four hour zone?"

"I never was up ahead of the sun before," she said with a little shiver, as she came close to the fire.

"I am heating over the coffee that was left. That will make you feel better."

"I suppose there isn't any water hereabouts to wash in. You know they teach us to be sanitary in the reformatories."

He pointed to a jar.

"I always carry some in the car. Help yourself."

"Arctic ablutions never appeal to me," she said when she had used the cold water freely and returned to the fire. "I found another

left-over in the shape of a sandwich minus the pork, so we can each have a slice of toast with our coffee."

She put a piece of bread on a forked stick and held it out to the blaze. He did the same with the other half of the sandwich. Then they partook of a meagre but welcome breakfast.

"Look!" he said presently in an awed voice.

The sun was sending a glorious searchlight of gold over the highest hill-line.

"Swell, isn't it?" she commented cheerily.

Her choice of adjectives repelled any further comments on Nature by him.

"I'm not used to sleeping out," she said, as he carefully raked over the remains of the fire, "and it didn't seem to rest me. Thank you for making me so comfortable, Mr. Walters."

She spoke gently; altogether her manner was so much more subdued this morning that he felt the same wave of pity he had felt

when Bender had first mentioned her case to him.

"I am sorry," he said, "that you had to stay out here all night. It was my fault; but you will have a more comfortable resting place to-night."

A sound was heard: a modern, welcome sound, breaking in distractingly on the primeval silence. Kurt hastened to the road and saw the encouraging prelude of dust. The passing tourist gave him the requisite supply of gasoline and continued on his way.

"Come on, Pen!" called the sheriff.

She suppressed a smile as she followed.

"You called me by my first name," she couldn't resist reminding him.

"I didn't know your last one," he responded quickly and resentfully as he helped her into the car.

"Let me think. I've had so many aliases — suppose I make out a list and let you take your choice. Most of my pals call me 'The Thief.'"

The look of yesterday came back to his eyes at her flippant tone and words.

"Don't!" he said harshly. "This morning I had forgotten what you were."

"I wish I could," she said forlornly. "We won't talk about it any more. Play I am pink perfect until we get to this 'first lady of the land' up at Top Hill. Oh, but motoring in the dawn is shivery! I loathe early morning when you get up to it. If you *stay up* for it, it's different."

He looked down at her quickly.

In the crisp morning air, her little figure was shaking as if with a chill. Her face was very white, and there was a bluish look about her mouth.

He stopped the car suddenly.

She smiled faintly at his look of concern.

"I'm all right," she said reassuringly, a spark of raillery again showing in her eyes before they closed, and she fell limply against him.

When she had recovered the consciousness

she had lost but momentarily, he was vigorously rubbing her hands.

"How warm and strong your hands feel," she said with a little sigh of content. "I never did anything so out of date before. I couldn't help it."

"You are nearly frozen," he said brusquely. "Why don't you wear more clothes?"

"I am wearing all I have," she said plaintively, with an attempt at a giggle.

A sudden recollection came to him. From under the seat he brought forth a heavy, gray sweater.

"I forgot I had this with me. Put it on."

"It's a slip-on. I'll have to take off my hat and coat to get into it."

When she removed her soft, shabby, battered hat which she had worn well down over her eyes even while she slept, her hair, rippling bronze and golden lights, fell about her face and shoulders in semi-curls.

He helped her into the sweater.

"It's sure snug and warm," she said ap-

provingly, as her head came out of the opening. "I won't need my coat."

"No; there's no warmth in it," he said, looking disdainfully at the thin, cheap garment. "Throw it away."

"With pleasure," she replied gaily. "Here's to my winter garment of repentance."

She flung the coat out on the road.

"What did you say?" he asked perplexedly.

"Nothing original. Just some words I st-t — I mean, borrowed."

She fastened back her hair and picked up her hat.

"Don't put that on!" he exclaimed, making another search under the seat and bringing forth a soft cap. She set it jauntily on her curls.

"How do you feel now? Well enough to ride on?"

"Yes; I am feeling 'fair and warmer' every minute."

When the car started, she relapsed into

silence. The sunshine was flooding the treeless hills and mellowing the cool, clean air. Up and down, as far as the eye could follow, which was very far in this land of great distances, the trail sought the big dominant hills that broke the sky-line before them. The outlook was restful, hopeful, fortifying.

"How are you — all right?" he asked presently.

"Perfectly all right. It's grand up here in all these high spots."

"Wait until we reach the hills around our ranch," he boasted. Then he laughed shortly. "I say 'our.' I'm only the foreman."

"What are you going to tell *her* about me?" she asked curiously, after another silence.

He slackened the pace and looked at her closely. The sweater and the sunshine had brought a faint tinge of wild-rose color to the transparency of her skin. The flippancy and boldness so prominent in her eyes the day

before had disappeared. She looked more as she had when she was asleep in the moonlight. A wave of kindness and brotherliness swept over him.

"I am going to tell her," he said gently, "that you are a poor little girl who needs a friend."

"Is that all you will tell her?"

"You may tell her as much or as little of your story as you think you should."

"You are a good man, but," she added thoughtfully, "the best of men don't understand women's ways toward each other. If I tell her my sordid little story, she may not want to help me — at least, not want to keep me up here in her home. I've not found women very helpful."

"She will help you and keep you, because —" he hesitated, and then continued earnestly, "before she was married, she was a settlement worker in a large city and she understood such —"

"As I," she finished. "I know the set-

tlement workers. They write you up — or down — in a sort of a Rogue Record, and you are classified, indexed, filed and treated by a system."

"She isn't that kind!" he protested indignantly. "She does her work by her heart, not by system. Have you ever really tried to reform?"

"Yes," she exclaimed eagerly. "I left Chicago for that purpose. I couldn't find work. I was cold and hungry; pawned everything they would take and got shabby like this," looking down disdainfully at herself, "but I didn't steal, not even food. I would have starved first. Then I was arrested up here for stealing. I wasn't guilty. Bender had no case, really; but he wouldn't give me a square deal or listen to anything in my favor, because my record was against me. You can't live down a record. There is no use trying."

"Yes, there is!" he declared emphatically. "I have always thought a thief incurable, but I believe *she* could perform the miracle."

"How old is she?" demanded Pen suddenly.

"I don't know," he answered vaguely, as if her age had never occurred to him before. "She has been married ten years."

"Oh! Did she marry the right man?"

"She certainly did. Kingdon is a prince."

"Any children?"

"Three; two little fellows as fine as are made, and a girl."

"I adoré children."

"I am glad to hear you say that. Every good woman loves children."

"And you really think there's the makings of a good woman in me?"

"Yes; I think so," he answered earnestly, "and if there's but a spark of goodness in you, she will find it and fan it to a glow."

She made a wry little grimace which fortunately he did not see.

"This goodness is nauseating me," she thought. "I shall beat it back about tomorrow."

"Look!" he cried, as the road made a sharp curve. "There it is!"

"You can lift your eyes to the hills! What a love of a place — way up on tiptoes. I'll be the little fish out of water up there!"

Top Hill Tavern was on a small plateau at the summit of one of the hills. The ranch-house, long, low and fanciful in design, connected by a covered portico with the kitchen, dairies and buildings, was misleading in name, for a succession of higher hills was in sight. A vined pergola, flower gardens, swings, tennis courts and croquet grounds gave the place a most unranch-like appearance.

As they rode up to the entrance porch, a woman came out of the house, and instantly the big, appraising eyes of the little newcomer felt that here was a type unknown to her. She was slender, not very tall, but with a poise and dignity of manner that compelled attention. Her eyes were gray; her lashes, brows and hair quite dark. There was a serenity and repose of manner about

her — the Madonna expression of gentleness — but with an added force.

"We looked for you last night, Kurt," she said in a voice, low and winning.

"Ran out of gasoline and had to spend the night on the road," he explained. "Mrs. Kingdon, this is a little girl — "

She didn't give him the opportunity to finish.

"Come in out of the sun," she urged.

Pen stepped from the car. There was no consciousness in the beautiful eyes of the "best woman in the world" that she was aware of the shabby, tan shoes, the cheap, faded and worn skirt, or the man's sweater and cap.

Pen's eyes had grown dark and thoughtful.

"Before I go in," she said turning to Kurt, "you must tell her who I am. Not what you said you were going to tell her, but where you found me and from what you saved me."

His face flushed.

"My dear little girl," said the woman

quickly, "I don't care to know — yet. It is enough that Kurt brought you."

"Mrs. Kingdom," said Kurt awkwardly but earnestly, "she is a poor girl who needs a friend."

"We all need a friend some time or other. Come in with me."

She led her up the steps. On the top one, the girl halted.

"He found me," she told Mrs. Kingdon, "in the custody of — Bender, for stealing, and he took me away to save me from jail, to bring me up here to the 'best woman in the world,' he said, and I made light of what he had done all the way up the trail. And he was so kind to me — me, a pickpocket. I think I should go back — to Bender."

She spoke with the impetuousity of a child, and turned to go down the steps.

Kurt looked on helplessly, perplexed by this last mood of his prismatic young prisoner.

Mrs. Kingdon took the girl's arm again.

"You are going to have a bed and bath

before you leave, anyway. Come with me. Kurt, you look as if you had best go to cover, too."

Pen's outbreak had evidently spent her last drop of reserve force. She submitted meekly to guidance through a long room with low-set windows. She noted a tiled floor with soft rugs, a fireplace and a certain pervading home-sense before they turned into a little hallway. Again she faintly protested.

"I am worse than a thief," she said. "I am a liar. I haven't told him — all."

"Never mind that now," said Mrs. Kingdon soothingly. "You've been ill recently, haven't you?"

"Yes; I was just about at the end of — "

"You're at the end of the trail now — the trail to Top Hill. You shall have a bath, a long sleep and something to eat before you try to tell me anything more."

Pen went on into a sunward room generously supplied with casement windows. A few rugs, a small but billowy bed, a chair and

a table comprised the furnishings, but an open door disclosed a bathroom and beyond that a dressing room most adequately equipped.

"This is clover," she thought presently, when she slipped into a warm bath.

"And this is some more clover," she murmured later, as, robed in a little nainsook gown, she stretched out luxuriously between lavender scented sheets. "I don't care what may come later. I know that I am going to have a real sleep."

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when she awoke. On the chair by her bed was a change of clothing, a pair of white tennis shoes, a dark blue skirt, a white middy and a red tie.

"Oh!" she thought. "The kind of clothes I love."

She hastened to dress partially, then slipped on a little negligee and began to do her hair.

"I wish it would sometimes go twice in the same place," she thought ruefully. "I never can fix it as I like. It's the only thing that

ever got the better of me except Kind Kurt. Well!" with an impatient shake of her rebellious locks, "go crop-cut, if you insist. I can't help it."

Mrs. Kingdon smiled when the little girlish figure opened the door in response to her knock.

"I felt sure that that outfit, which was left here by my fifteen-year-old niece when she last visited us, would fit you, though Kurt insists that you are twenty. You had a nice sleep, didn't you?"

"I think I never really slept before. Such a bed, and such heavenly quiet! So different from street-car racket."

"My husband and the boys have been away all day, or there wouldn't have been such quiet. Dinner is ready. Kurt didn't tell me your name."

"Penelope Lamont. My first name is always shortened to Pen or Penny."

Down stairs in the long, low-ceilinged library she was introduced to Mr. Kingdon,

a man of winning personality, a philosopher and a humorist. Ranged beside him were three appalling critics: two boys of nine and seven years respectively, and a little girl of five. They stared at her solemnly and surveyingly while she was presented to their father.

"Can you skin a weasel?" asked Francis, the oldest lad, when Pen turned to him.

"Mother said you were a young lady," said Billy. "You're just a little girl like Doris was."

"And you've got on her clothes," declared Betty sagely.

"Now you surely should feel at home," declared Mrs. Kingdon.

"Margaret," commented her husband whimsically, "our children seem to be quite insistent on recognition and rather inclined to be personal in their remarks, don't you think?"

"We so seldom have visitors up here, you know," defended the mother, smiling at Pen

the while. "We will go into the dining room now."

Throughout the meal Pen was subtly conscious of an undercurrent of a most willing welcome to the hospitality of the ranch. Her surmise that the vacant place at the table was reserved for the foreman was verified by Betty who asked with a pout:

"Why don't we wait for Uncle Kurt?"

"He dined an hour ago and rode away," explained Mrs. Kingdon. "He will be back before your bedtime."

Every lull in the conversation was eagerly and instantly utilized by one or more of the children, who found Pen most satisfactorily responsive to their advances.

"You've had your innings, Francis," the father finally declared. "That will be the last from you."

"There's one thing more I want to know," he pleaded. "Miss Lamont, do colored people ever have — what was it you said you were afraid Miss Lamont had, mother?"

"Oh, Francis!" exclaimed his mother. "I said," looking at Pen, "that I feared you were anemic, and then I had to describe the word minutely."

"Are they ever that, Miss Lamont?" insisted the boy.

"I never thought of it before," answered Pen after a moment's reflection, "but I don't see why they couldn't be so, same as white people."

"Then how could they tell they had it. They wouldn't look white, would they?"

"Suppose," interceded Kingdon, "we try to find a less colorful topic. I move we adjourn to the library for coffee."

"We stay up an hour after dinner," said Billy, when they were gathered about the welcome open fire, "but when we have company, it's an hour and a half."

"I should think that rule would be reversed," replied Kingdon humorously.

"Then, aren't you glad I'm here?" Pen asked Billy.

"Sure!" came in hearty assurance. "You can stay up a long time, can't you, because you slept all day?"

"Play with us," besought Betty.

"Yes; play rough," demanded Billy.

Mrs. Kingdon interposed. "She's too tired to do that," she admonished the children.

Betty came forward with a box of paper and a pair of scissors.

"You can cut me some paper dolls. That won't tire you."

"I don't want dolls!" scoffed Francis.

Pen was already using the articles Betty had furnished.

"Not if we call them circus ladies and I cut horses for them to ride on?" she asked him.

"Can you do that?" he inquired unbelievingly.

"Certainly. Dashing horses that will stand up," she boasted, and in another moment a perfectly correct horse was laid before the delighted boys.

A few more rapid snips and a short-skirted lady was handed to Betty.

"Now, make a clown, a lion, a tiger, an elephant," came in quick, short orders which were readily filled.

"My dear young lady," exclaimed Kingdon. "You are really talented. It is so seldom an artist can do anything but draw."

"I can't draw. I am just a cutter," she corrected. "I can't do anything with a pencil."

They were all so absorbed in the paper products that Kurt's entrance passed unnoted.

"Betty," he said imploringly, after waiting a moment without recognition, "you can't guess what's in my pocket?"

Pen looked up unbelievingly. The caressing, winning note had utterly disguised his voice. As he handed the delighted Betty a satisfactorily shaped parcel, his glance rested upon his prisoner, bringing a quick gleam of surprise to his eyes.

"I am taking out my first papers, you see,"

she announced, pointing to the miniature menagerie.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he asked.

"A man showed me," she said noncommittally.

"What else can you cut?" demanded Francis.

"I can cut an airship."

"Cut me one."

"To-morrow," said Mrs. Kingdon. "The time limit is up."

"Did you ever go up in an airship?" asked Billy eagerly.

"No; but I know a man who flies," she boasted.

"Come upstairs and tell us about him," demanded Billy.

As his mother cordially seconded the invitation, Pen accompanied them to the nursery. When the last "good nights" had been said to the children, Mrs. Kingdon led the way to her room.

"The moon shouldn't seem so far away," declared Pen, looking out of the broad window. "We are up so high."

"I haven't yet ceased to wonder at these hills," rejoined Mrs. Kingdon. "We bought this ranch merely for a vacation place, but three-fourths of our time is spent up here, as we have become so attached to it. Mr. Kingdon is an artist, so he never tires of watching the hills and the sky. Sometimes we feel selfish with so much happiness — when there isn't enough to go around."

"I know you take but a small percentage of what you give. Shall I tell my story now?"

"I think I know it — or some of it, at least," replied Mrs. Kingdon, looking at her intently.

Pen looked up with a startled gesture.

"You do! How — "

"When I was in your room just before dinner, it came to me where I had seen you before. It was about a year ago — in San

Francisco — in a police station. I made inquiries; was interested in you and tried to see you, but we were suddenly called home. I should like to hear more about your life and what brought you to these hills."

"I wish no one else need know it," she said entreatingly, when she had told her story in detail.

"Kurt is surely entitled to know it *all*," replied Mrs. Kingdon.

"I suppose he is; though I wish he didn't know as much as he already does. It isn't necessary to tell him to-night, is it? I am still tired in spite of my long rest."

"To-morrow will do. If you like, I will tell him, and I wish you and he would leave the entire matter — about Jo and all — in my hands."

"Most gladly," assented Pen. "But where is Jo?"

"He is on a neighboring ranch — temporarily, only."

"There is something else I should like to

know. Why is Kurt so different from most men? Doesn't he ever look pleasant, or was his gloom all on my account?"

"His life hasn't been exactly conducive to jollity. He was born in New England and brought up on pie and Presbyterianism by a spinstered aunt who didn't understand boys. He ran away and came to the West. He has been cattle-herder, cowboy and everything else typical of the hill country. We came here, tenderfooted, and were most fortunate in finding a foreman like Kurt Walters. He has a wonderful way of handling men. He is of good habits, forceful, keen; very gentle to old people and most adorable with children. We make him one of our household. There is the fortunate flaw that keeps him from being super-excellent; he is not merciful to wrongdoers and, as you say, he is too serious — almost moody. That is accounted for by the long night vigils of the cattlemen. They get a habit of inhibition that they never lose. I think the men find him very good company

at times. There is one splendid thing about him. In spite of his rough life and the many years in which he has had opportunity to meet only the — misguided kind of women, he has never lost faith in his ideals of womanhood."

"I certainly rubbed him the wrong way," said Pen comprehendingly. "He looked upon me as if there were no place on his map for my kind, and yet he struggled hard to be good to me when I was suffering from cold and hunger. I never met his sort of a man before. The men I have been thrown with think goodness stupid. No matter what crime a girl commits, providing she is attractive in any way, they applaud and call her a 'little devil.'"

"He talked of you a great deal to-day, and about your chances for reformation."

Pen smiled enigmatically.

"He said he would have felt more sympathy for me if I had not been educated and knew the enormity of my sins. If he knew more

of the world, he would know that the intelligent criminal has the least chance to reform. When he took me so unexpectedly from Bender, I wanted to see what he was going to do with me. When I found he was bringing me out here, I could have easily given him the slip and escaped, but I was curious to see the 'best woman in the world.' I never had faith in a man's estimate of a woman, but as soon as I saw you, I knew he was right. May I stay? Will you really let me?"

"I quite insist upon your staying. We will go downstairs for a little while now."

Below, Mrs. Kingdon lingered to give some directions to a servant and Pen went on to the library.

Kurt was standing there alone. She stood small and straight before her warden, looking squarely into his eyes.

"You needn't," she said, "put any locks on valuables here — not on my account. The crookedest crook in the world wouldn't steal from *her*."

"I am glad you recognize a true woman," he said earnestly.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I feel it's the turning point in my life."

"Then," he said earnestly, "I feel I have done something worth while. You shall not leave here until — you see I am speaking plainly — you have overcome all desire to steal."

"Not a severe penalty, O Sheriff Man!" she thought as she replied meekly: "To-night I feel as if I could never do anything wrong; but you know the strongest of us have our lapses."

"I know that too well," he said gravely, "but — you'll try?"

"I'll try. Good-night, Mr. Walters."

In the doorway she paused and looked back. He was gazing meditatively into the flames of the open fire. She shook a little defiant fist at him and made a childish grimace, both of which actions were witnessed by Kingdon as he entered the room.

"Do you know," he confided later to his wife, with a chuckle of reminiscence, "as fine a fellow as Kurt is, I sometimes feel like shaking a fist at him myself."

CHAPTER IV

As on the day previous, Pen awoke at an early hour. She lay quiet for a moment, sensing to the full the deliciousness of being cosily submerged in soft, warm coverings that protected her from the crisp, keen hill-winds that were sweeping into her room.

"The air smells as if it came right off the snow," she thought, as she drew on some fur-bound slippers and wrapped herself in a Navajo blanket that was on the footrail of her bed. Then she crossed the room, climbed up on the big seat under the casement window and looked out.

It was not the thrilling beauty of the covey of pink-lined dawn-clouds that made her eyes grow round, big and bright; that brought a faint flush to her cheeks; a quick intake of breath. It was something much more mundane that held her attention — the superb

spectacle of Kurt Walters, mounted. The lean, brown horseman sat on his saddle as easily as though it were a cushion in a rocking chair. He was talking to three or four cattlemen and apparently paying no attention to his cavorting steed except that occasionally and casually his firm hands brought the plunging animal to earth.

"He's to the saddle born," thought the girl admiringly. "He ought to stay on a horse. If I'd seen him yesterday on horseback, he wouldn't have had to *take* me. I'd have flown to him."

He gave a last command to one of the men, as he turned to ride away.

"All right, boss," was the reply, as the men dispersed to their various stations of duty.

Suddenly and psychologically the eyes of the rider were lifted to the casement window. Pen waved her hand airily toward him, the movement loosening the gayly striped blanket which fell from her shoulders. The Indian-

brown of his face reddened darkly; a gleam came into his steel-gray eyes. He made a military motion toward his hat brim with his whip and then rode swiftly away, without the backward and upward look which she was expecting.

"The boss is a bashful boss," she thought, with a lazy little pout, as she shook off the blanket, flung her slippers free and went back to bed.

"He's good to look at, but oh, you comfortable cot!"

When next she awoke, it was near the breakfast hour.

"I'm glad I'm not the last one down," she said, as she came into the dining-room and noticed Kurt's vacant chair.

"Oh, but you are!" Betty hastened to say. "Uncle Kurt's gone away for a whole week, hasn't he, father?"

"When did he go, Louis?" asked Mrs. Kingdon in surprise.

"A message came for him late last night,"

explained her husband. "The sheriff has unexpectedly returned, and Kurt has to be in town for a week to settle up all the red tape routine for his release; and besides, the trial of So Long Sam has been called, and he'll have to attend."

Pen had a sense as of something lifted.

"A reprieve for a week, and I can have a beautiful time with nobody nigh to hinder," she thought. "I had a narrow escape from a real sheriff. Luck is with me, and no mistake!"

"You will feel lost without Kurt at the helm, won't you, Louis?" asked Mrs. Kingdon. "And Jo away, too."

"Westcott returned Jo this morning. Simpson has delayed his trip to Canada for a few days."

"That is good news. Of course Jo hasn't Kurt's efficiency, but he gets on well with the men."

"They say," remarked Francis sagely, "that Jo is always 'right there.'"

"So is Uncle Kurt!" exclaimed Betty indignantly.

"You don't get me, Betty," said her brother loftily, "but it's no use explaining to a girl."

Pen had been a most attentive and eager listener to this conversation.

"I am sorry I didn't know Kurt was going to town," said Mrs. Kingdon to Pen, "for we could have sent him for some things for you."

"What kind of things?" asked Betty curiously.

"I came without my luggage," explained Pen glibly, "but I can trim out clothes as easily as I can animals, and if you have any stray pieces of cloth I can very quickly duplicate what I am now wearing."

"We have quantities of material," said Mrs. Kingdon. "I seem to have a mania for buying it, and there my interest in new garments ceases. Agatha is a fine seamstress, so we'll have you outfitted in no time."

"Wouldn't you like to motor over the place,

Miss Pen?" invited Kingdon as they rose from the table. Smiling understandingly at her look of alarm, he added: "I don't mean in the car Kurt brought you up in yesterday."

"Uncle Kurt made it all himself — out of parts he bought," boasted Francis.

"Dear me!" said Pen ruefully. "I wish he hadn't bought so many parts, or else left some of them out."

"It's a fine car!" declared Francis in tone of rebuke.

"I like it better than ours," said Billy. "We helped make it."

"I throw up my hands," said Kingdon. "Only the loyalty of a child would have the courage to defend such a car."

In a long, luxurious limousine the entire family made the rounds of the ranch to show Pen the squadrons of cattle browsing by the creek, thoroughbred horses inclosed in a pasture of many miles, the smaller-spaced farmyard, the buildings, bunk-houses and "Kurt's

Kabin," as a facetious cowboy had labeled the office where the foreman made out the pay rolls and transacted the business affairs of the ranch.

"I think you have seen it all, now," said Kingdon, as he turned the car into the driveway that led homeward.

"Oh, no!" cried Billy. "She hasn't seen Jo yet. There he is at the mess house."

"Of course, you must see Jo, Miss Pen," said Kingdon. "I'll drop you and the kiddies here and you can call on him. I have an idea he will be more Jo-like if my wife and I are not present."

The car stopped near a long low building, and Pen with the children got out of the car.

"Jo-o-o!" chorused the trio.

From the house came Jo, whom the men had nicknamed the "human spider," for his arms and legs were the thinnest of his species. He was saved from being grotesque, however, by a certain care-free grace, a litheness of movement. He had greenish-blue eyes that

were set far apart and crinkled when they laughed — as ever and oft they did. His features were irregular, his hair unruly, but there was a lovable appeal in the roguish eyes and the charm of humor in a mouth that lifted upward at the corners.

"Halloa, kindergarten!" he called in a jovial tenor. "Who's your little old sister?"

"She isn't our sister," denied Francis with dignified mien. "She's a young lady."

"Honest?" he asked in amused tone, looking down at the girl whose eyes were hidden by long-lashed, down-turned lids. "How young now?"

Then his dancing eyes grew suddenly quiet and amazed, as her lashes lifted. He read a warning in her glance.

"Jo," she said gravely and meaningly, "I am *Penelope Lamont,* and I am a young lady — out of my teens."

"'Scuse," he answered seriously, "but you don't dress it."

"She's got on Doris's clothes," explained

Betty, "'cause she didn't bring any of her own, and she's our Aunty Penny."

"No," he said solemnly. "No, she ain't! You've got it wrong side to. Her name is Penny Ante."

"It isn't either!" cried Betty angrily, with a stamp of her little foot.

"Uncle Kurt brought her here. She's his company, so you'd better look out, Jo Gary!" warned Billy.

Jo made a mock gesture of alarm and shielded his face with his arm as if from an imaginary blow.

"Now, why didn't you say so in the first place! My, ain't it the luck for me that he won't be sheriff when he comes back! He might have had me put in the lock-up."

"I am not Mr. Walters' company — not now," explained Pen. "I came up here with him, to be sure, but Mrs. Kingdon has asked me to be her company until I am well. I have been ill."

"Double 'scuse. And this is the best place

in the world to get well. Some little old ranch, and Kurt Walters is some foreman."

"Aren't you foreman now?"

"When Kurt is here, I'm nothing but a cow-hand; when he is away, I'm only acting foreman. I'll never be anything but just acting-something, I guess."

"Kurt Walters was only acting sheriff."

"That's so. We seem to be mostly actingers or actorines," he allowed. "Say!" turning ferociously to Francis, "what business has a boy looking like an owl? Loosen up, and have some pep!"

The boy's fair face flushed.

"It's none of your business how I look, Jo Gary!"

"Wow! Now you're talking. We can't fight before a lady, though."

"Cook says you look like a wishbone, Jo," taunted Billy, coming to his brother's defense.

"She did, did she? Well, the cook can hang me over her door, and then — I'll kiss her."

918224

"I'll tell her, and she won't dance with you to-night."

"If you do," threatened Jo, "I won't tell you where there are four little, new kittens what haven't got their peepers opened yet."

"Oh, where, Jo? We'll not tell her. Please, Jo!" pleaded Betty.

"I choose to name them," said Francis. "Tell, Jo."

"I'll not tell, unless you get your little new playmate here to promise me a dance to-night."

"Are you really going to have a dance to-night?" asked the girl eagerly.

"Sure thing we are. Right here in this mess hall, and —" looking at her fixedly, he added slowly, "you can dance, too, — with me."

"Oh!" she cried, her eyes shining. "It will seem so beautiful — to dance again. What do they dance up here — fox trot?"

"We dance any old thing the music tells us to."

"Same as they do in — Chicago?" she asked demurely.

"Now tell us where the kittens are," demanded Betty.

"Follow me, little Black and Tan."

In her excitement Betty forgot to resent Jo's pet appellation for her.

He led the way to a corner of the tool-house.

Reposing in a nest made of pieces of carpet lined with soft flannel, were four puffballs of maltese which were quickly gathered and garnered by Pen and the children, while the mother-cat looked on with proud but apprehensive eyes.

"Who fixed them such a nice bed?" asked Francis.

"Your Uncle Kurt. But they tell me he rode away at first crack of daybreak, so he didn't see them."

"And they'll have their eyes open before he gets back, maybe!" lamented Francis.

"Perhaps," put in Jo, "he'll get his eyes

opened wide while he's gone. Then he and the kits can meet on equal terms."

"He'll miss the dance, too," said Betty sorrowfully.

"Whom do you men dance with?" asked Pen.

"Well, there's Betty here stays up for three dances anyway, and there's Mrs. Kingdon, and Ag, and the cook, and the other girl — and everything else failing, we make Gene Dossey play gal."

"What music do you have?"

"We've got two of the finest fiddlers that ever drew a bow. Sleepy Sandy and Jakey Fourr. Say, Billy Kingdon, if you squeeze that kitten so hard, its eyes 'll bust open before the nine-day limit. Put them all down now, or their ma 'll have a kitnip fit."

"I choose to name them," said Francis. "Uncle Sam is this biggest one; the one with white on is General Joffre, and the little one is King George and —"

"Hold on there!" cried Jo. "Uncle Sam

and General J. goes all right, all right; but there ain't room for another gent's name. You'll have to change King George to Georgette."

"I won't have her named Georgette!" said Betty. "Her name is Fairy Queen, and that other one is —"

"It's my turn!" said Billy. "Mine 's going to be named Mewtral."

"You mean Neutral," corrected Francis scathingly.

"No; he's said it," declared Jo. "She's mewtralled all the morning. She don't seem to like her boarding house. Now, all you kidlets run to the kitchen and ask cook for a cup of milk and a clean rag. I'll force-feed Mewtral, 'cause she's a little suffragette. Don't hurry back too fast."

The children went with alacrity and returned in the same way; but Pen and Jo improved the opportunity for conversation without the three interested listeners.

"Here, Jo," said Billy, handing over the

milk when they had returned. "Let's see you feed Mewtral. She must be hungry."

"If she were me," said Jo, whose eyes were shining, "she'd be too happy to eat."

He fed the kitten and then tried in vain to obtain further converse with Pen alone, but the children out-maneuvered all his efforts and finally Pen took them back to the house.

"When?" half whispered Jo, as they were leaving.

"When Mrs. Kingdon says," she murmured in reply.

She turned back for another glance. He was standing, cap in hand, with the air of a conqueror.

"What's the verdict on Jo?" asked Kingdon.

"Jo's inimitable," she replied lightly.

"Wait until you dance with him," he said. "Jo dances his way into every girl's heart."

"I can believe that."

"He's one of those sunny-hearted fellows that people take to be shallow, but under the

surface brightness there's a tolerably deep current. And he never nurses a grudge. If anyone should stick a knife in Jo, he'd only make a question mark of his eyebrow and give a wondering smile."

"What I can't understand," said Pen, "is why the children don't like him."

"He plagues us all the time," complained Betty.

"It's very odd, though," commented Kingdon, meditatively, and with a twinkle in his eye, "how you do like to be plagued. You are always tagging at his heels. I think you must be coquetting with Jo."

"He's so different with them from Kurt," said Mrs. Kingdon. "Kurt is so patient and so sweet with children. He understands them."

"Kurt," said Pen, "seems to be like some things that are too good for everyday use. He should be laid away on a shelf for Sundays." Then, meeting Mrs. Kingdon's wondering eyes, she added with a little flush:

"That isn't true — and it's unkind! I don't really mean it."

"We are all ready for our sewing bee," observed Mrs. Kingdon, smiling. "What shall we begin on?"

"I'm wondering," said Pen meditatively, "if I hadn't better rig up something evening-like for the dance to-night. If you could let me borrow a white muslin curtain, I could easily rig it up into an impromptu dance frock."

"Jo said he knew a man who turned an automobile into a lamp post," said Betty.

"Oh, Betty!" laughed Pen, "maybe there is hope for a sinner to be turned into a saint."

"We won't have to resort to curtains," said Mrs. Kingdon. "I have a white satin skirt that is too short for me, and you can fashion a waist from a piece of white muslin."

"And Doris left her white slippers that were too short for her," reminded Betty.

"To think," meditated Pen presently as

she deftly cut out a waist, "that the thief should be making evening clothes, when it was only but yesterday she was booked for bars instead of balls."

CHAPTER V

The two fiddlers were tuning their instruments when the party from the house entered the rosy-lighted mess-hall. Jo started forward with an air of assurance to claim Pen. When he beheld her, he stopped abruptly, lost in admiration of the daintily clad young person whose Castle-cut locks had been lured to a coiffure from which little tendrils escaped in babyish rings.

Jakey Fourr, second violin, glimpsed her at the same time and noticed Jo's hesitating halt.

"Ladies' Choice!" he shouted with a grin.

Jo looked at her expectantly but vainly; for she gladdened the pride of Francis by choosing him as her partner. Betty and Billy mutually chose each other. Mrs. Kingdon selected a newcomer. Agatha and the "other girl" asked their particular friends, and the cook

spitefully "sat it out." Pen had to follow the prim little steps learned by Francis at a city dancing school the winter before, and Sleepy Sandy thoughtfully timed his tune thereto and shortened the number. Then Jo started for the belle of the ball, but a youth in combination attire of hunter, cowboy and soldier was ahead of him.

"Would you honor me, ma'am?" he asked.

She would and did, but she never learned the name of the wonderful dance with which she "honored" him. It had been a case of "whither thou goest, I will go."

Again Sleepy Sandy was considerate and cut this number short also.

Then Betty came running breathlessly up to Pen.

"Jo says if you don't dance with him this next time like you promised, he 'll drown the kittens. Please, Aunt Pen!"

Jo was promptly on hand this time.

"This is mine," he asserted, "unless you're danced out by that gink."

"My dancing blood isn't up yet," she said, slipping into his arms. She didn't care to know the name of the dance. All she knew was the ecstasy of the moment in the flowing, melting rhythm. Jo had the easy assurance of the dancer born, and she went where he willed, as if she were floating on silver wires. Finally, Sleepy Sandy, watching them in envious admiration, was aware that he had played as long as the law of limit allowed.

"Isn't this better than Reilly's?" she asked demurely.

"There will never in the world be to me a night like the one at Reilly's," he replied.

"Jo, why don't you go into vaudeville? Your dancing would bring you twice what your work here must."

"Mine is a man's job," he retorted. "I'd rather dance horseback than on any stage. I have to go over to Farley with a lot of cattle to-morrow. It will take me three days. You will arrange to see me again when I come back?"

"I surely will, Jo," she promised.

"Don't let Jo monopolize you," said Kingdon, coming up to them at the close of the dance. "We try to give the boys plenty of recreation, and they don't get many girls to dance with. None like you."

Pen dutifully promised to do penance with the rank and file.

"I'll go and ask the cook," said Jo mournfully, "else I won't get half rations. Then I'll come back for you."

Reluctantly he gave way to Gene and approached the cook.

"Say!" he asked with a quirk to his mouth, "want to hook on to the wishbone?"

"Those darned brats fetch and carry everything they hear," she exclaimed.

"Forget it. A wishbone's the best bone to pick anyway."

Thereafter he waited patiently for Pen to do her duty dances and slip one in with him.

Pen went to sleep that night with blissful recollections of her wonderful dances with Jo

and a vague curiosity as to whether Kurt Walters could dance.

For the greater part of three days she sewed assiduously, surrounded the while by three admiring children who listened entranced to a new kind of Scheherazade tales. Between times she gathered flowers for the many jugs and jars, learned to make salads and to perform little household duties hitherto unknown. Then suddenly there came a swift change of mood. The sense of uneasiness, the need of freedom, the desire that pervades the wistful note of the imprisoned bird was in her blood.

"My life is too full of work-days," she declared. "Three days of domesticity! I can no more. I will see if Jo hasn't returned."

Seeking new fields that night, she slipped surreptitiously down to the mess hall.

"Halloa!" greeted Jo rapturously. "I've been watching for you, Li'l Penny Ante. Just got back. What you been doing since the dance?"

"Behaving. And I must get even some

way or go stark mad. What have you been doing?"

"Me? Jakey here and I've been entertaining ourselves with a game of craps."

"Play it with me instead. It's the only game I've never learned."

"Sure, I'll show you. Sit down here on the floor."

Later Kingdon, in search of the missing guest, strolled down to the mess hall, guided thither by a rippling laugh chorused with responsive guffaws.

Curious, he looked in. Seated on the floor were Jo and Pen excitedly playing an evenly matched game, while an adoring circle of men applauded, encouraged and scoffed in turn.

There were two patches of crimson in Pen's cream-white cheeks, a bright sparkle of excitement in her eyes, which changed to the apprehensive look of a child expecting reproof as she looked up and saw Kingdon.

"I'm having such a good time!" she told him deprecatingly.

He smiled.

"You look it. The children and the rest of us are lamenting your absence. We want a good time, too."

"I'll come again," she promised, with a backward look at the men, as she docilely walked on with Kingdon.

Jo hurried after them.

"To-morrow's field day," he reminded her. "You'll be there?"

"I'm living on the thought of it. You're the manager, aren't you?"

He grinned.

"*Acting* manager — for Kurt Walters."

"Mayn't I do a stunt, too?" she asked eagerly.

"Sure thing, you may. We'll be glad to have a novelty in the way of a lady performer. What'll it be?"

"I'll see you in the morning and tell you what I can do."

Mrs. Kingdon smiled understandingly when she heard of the game of craps.

CHAPTER VI

With a little sigh of relief and pleasure, Pen laid aside some garments, on which she had been steadily and surreptitiously working, and sought Jo.

"Come down under cover of one of the hills," she urged, "and I will show you what my part in the day's work will be. Special exhibition. Admittance free, but no other spectators allowed."

Half an hour later Jo was gazing at her as one gazes at some marvelous performer, but his awe and admiration were expressed in a simple but effective phrase:

"Oh, baby, but you can put it over them all!"

That afternoon when the Kingdon household came down to occupy the row of raised seats erected in the "field," Pen was missing. Her absence was a mystery until the following

typed programs for the day were handed out:

OUTLAW HORSE SHOW
TOP HILL PARK

JO GARY, Champion Rider of Top Hill, will ride TURN TURTLE and PINCH HITTER.

SLEEPY SANDY will ride BATTLESHIP GRAY and BABY DOLL.

JAKEY FOURR will ride PICKLED PETE and PIKER.

GENE DOSSEY will ride HIAWATHA and WHIZZ.

MISS PENNY ANTE
(Miss Penelope Lamont)
Will ride *anything brought into the ring!*

GREAT EXHIBITION OF ROUGH RIDING by the most notorious riders of the West. Only the most unmanageable animals will be ridden.

Kingdon's eye-glasses came off with a sense of shock.

"This will never do, Margaret!" he exclaimed. "Those crazy boys have no sense. They'll bring out some of those wild horses, and that meek-looking, little daredevil friend of Kurt's will call any bluff. She mustn't be allowed to ride."

His wife restrained him as he started away.

"I feel confident that she can do — anything. She told me she could ride."

"Well," he replied resignedly, "I always have left everything regarding girls to your judgment, so I suppose I must now, but I am surprised at you."

The children were thrown into a state of excitement on deciphering Pen's part in the coming feats.

A bugle sounded.

Into the ring rode the four slim, young top riders of the ranch force, chaparajos and sombreros being much in evidence. They gave the usual stunts in the typical Western way

on a track tramped as hard as asphalt, the tattoo of hoofs making the hard earth ring in the soundless atmosphere. Their feats, singly and together, were marvelous, but there was lacking to the onlookers the charm of novelty, as they had long been accustomed to these and similar exhibitions of horsemanship.

Everyone's heart beat a little faster with expectancy, therefore, when there came another blare of the trumpet. Into the ring came "Miss Penny Ante," slim and straight as a boy scout, clad in puttees, dark blue breeches and an olive-drab blouse.

A sleek, shy colt was suddenly inducted into the scene of action. Then there began a frisky game of maneuvers. The little, would-be rider proved as wary and nimble as the colt on which she finally succeeded in shooting a bridle. Another round of come and go, and one leg went over the slender neck, and then down the glossy back slid the lithe figure. With a wondering, protesting neigh, the colt

tried all the tactics known to his species, but they were of no avail, and after circling and re-circling the ring, Pen calmly relinquished him and awaited the next offer.

A wild-eyed mustang was the victim. As soon as she was mounted, he rose high on his hind feet but came down like a lamb and ended in spinning like a top around the ring.

A general protest went up when a demoniacal-looking buckskin was produced.

"They are horse-mad!" exclaimed Kingdon. "Margaret, this is going to stop right here."

"Louis," she replied earnestly, "this is only horse-play to Pen. No, I am not punning. I didn't know she was going to make this exhibition, but some way I feel that she can easily live up to the promises in the program."

With a plunge the buckskin went straight into mid-air and came down hard. Then at full speed amid a whirling of dust, he tried all his tricks, but always the little figure held

her position, easily triumphant, and finally the hitherto unmountable animal again came trembling to earth and obediently followed his rider's will.

"You've won!" cried the cowboys.

"Now, bring me a horse, a real saddle horse — the kind you give a kingdom for!" she demanded. "I'd like to *ride* a bit, if you don't mind."

They brought her a beautiful thoroughbred. She rode around the ring a few times, and then, leaping the fence to the inclosure, was away and over the hills, her blood throbbing, her heart pounding as she felt the soft, southwest wind in her face, the siren song of freedom ringing in her ears. The divine sweetness of the mountain air was in her nostrils. She was recalled from her state of rhapsody by the sound of pounding hoofs behind her. She half turned in her saddle, expecting to see Jo. She didn't need the commanding-toned "Wait!" to rein in her horse.

There was an inscrutable look in the blaz-

ing eyes of the approaching horseman, a compelling force in his broad shoulders as he rode up to her.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Nowhere. Just riding," she replied.

Her uplifted face was vivid with joy, her eyes sparkling. Suddenly a wave of color suffused her cheeks.

"I wasn't running away!" she declared, suppressing a chuckle. "Honest, I wasn't. It's field day. I've been doing stunts and I just ached for a real, regular ride. It's so grand to be astride a horse and feel the world is yours! When did you come home?"

"I haven't come home. I am on my way to Fowler's to subpœna a witness, and I rode this way meaning to stop but a moment. I came over the big hill just as you rode into the ring."

She stole a look at his impassive face.

"And you saw the sports?"

"Yes; and rode on after you —"

"Because you feared your prisoner might

be taking French leave? No; this is the end of the rainbow to me. I have no desire to leave — at present."

They were riding slowly on.

"Where did you learn to ride?"

"I don't remember; it was so long ago."

"*That* was circus riding."

"It did look like it," she said deprecatingly.

"If you can ride like that, why did you leave the circus for the life — "

"Of a crook?" she finished. "Suppose I stole a horse and sold it and had to vamoose. Even circus managers don't employ thieves."

"Who gave you permission to ride today?" he demanded.

"She pulled from the pocket of her blouse a program and handed it to him.

"You see I was featured," she explained modestly.

He read it with a frown expressive of displeasure.

"Did Mrs. Kingdon know you were going to do this?"

"No one but one of the men knew."

"How did you come to meet the men?"

"The children introduced me to one of them and I met the others at the dance. I never knew what dancing really meant until then. I've learned to pay a very gamey game, too. Craps."

With a jerk Kurt brought his horse to a halt and reaching over caught her bridle as she was about to spur her horse onward.

"Did you tell Mrs. Kingdon everything?" he asked sternly.

"Everything I could remember," she replied demurely. "Far more than I told you."

"What did she say?"

"She is going to talk to you and ask you to leave the entire matter in her hands."

He broke the short silence that followed.

"Dancing, craps and bronco-breaking are not what I brought you here for."

"But I've done lots of other things, too. Sewed three days straight, learned how to

make salads, heard the children's lessons, picked flowers and getting wise to a home atmosphere every minute. You won't send me away?"

He was scowling at the program again.

"Why are you called Penny Ante?"

"You object to all of my names. But this one was Betty's fault. She introduced me as 'Aunt Penny,' and of course they put it backward."

"Who do they think you are?"

"Your 'lady friend' here for a visit," she answered with the little giggle that always offended him. Then, appeasingly: "Mrs. Kingdon said it would be better if only you and she knew who I am and why I am here at the ranch."

"Go back to the house," he directed. "I'll be home in a few days."

Obediently she turned her horse and he rode in the opposite direction.

"Kurt — Mr. Walters!" she called entreatingly.

He turned in his saddle and waited until she rode back to him.

"There is something I want to tell you," she said, her eyes downcast, a faint note of exultation in her voice. "I haven't taken a thing — or tried to — or wanted to — since I've been here, and I've had lots of chances."

Receiving no reply, she looked up pleadingly, and was startled at the transformation in his eyes, which were usually narrow, cold and of steel-gray shade, but now were dark, shining and full of infinite pity as they looked down into hers.

"I am glad to hear it," he said gently. "You know that was why I brought you here. Now you must do more for me. You mustn't mingle with the men, or repeat to-day's program. I want you to be like her — a house-woman. Good-bye — until I come home."

He rode swiftly away, and she laughed softly to herself, stopping suddenly.

"It isn't so funny after all; it's really pathetic. But — a house-woman! Ye Gods!

That is the last thing I want to be — or could be. It's all well for a novelty, but for steady diet — oh, me! If Hebby could have heard the law laid down to me, he'd be overcome with glee. Poor old Heb! I bet he is still frothing at the mouth because I gave him such a neat slip. I seem, however, to have only succeeded in changing keepers."

She rode on, her conscience smiting her now and then when she recalled the look in Kurt's eyes.

"I don't deserve pity from him or anyone," she thought a little sadly.

She made no mention at Top Hill of having met the foreman. Notwithstanding his orders, for three days she revelled in the companionship of Jo and the men.

"We must harvest all the hay we can," she told him, "while Kind Kurt is away."

On the evening of the third day, she found herself watching the hill road from town.

"I feel like Sister Anne," she thought. "It's odd, why I am wanting him to return,

for when he does, my fun will be nipped in the bud. It may be the feeling of a dog for its master that I have acquired for my sheriff man. Jo will be going soon to Westcott's. I think I will play up to Kind Kurt and then tell him what I revealed to Mrs. Kingdon. Wow!"

She turned from the window to hear the message Kingdon had just received from the telegraph office in town. An old-time friend had asked him to join a party of men at a ranch a hundred miles distant. His wife urged him to follow his apparent inclination.

"It'll do you good, Louis, to see more of your kind again."

"I wouldn't consider it if you didn't have such good company," he said, with a whimsical smile in Pen's direction.

The following morning, Jo drove Mrs. Kingdon, Pen and the children to town to see Kingdon off. When his train had pulled out, they went to the postoffice and Francis was sent in for the mail.

"A letter for you, mother," he said, running up to the car. "It's Aunt Helen's writing."

An anxious look came into Margaret Kingdon's eyes as she read.

"Doris is ill, and my sister wants me to come to her," she explained to Pen. "She is quite helpless in a sick room and Doris asks for me. There is a train east in an hour and you can send my luggage on to me. I'll return as soon as Doris is convalescent."

"I will do all I can to help with the children," promised Pen.

"I know you will. And Jo can stop at Mrs. Merlin's and take her to Top Hill. She always presides in my absence. She is a good housekeeper and is never disagreeable or officious."

"Jo says Mrs. Merlin shinnies on her own side," added Billy.

"Jo is right," replied his mother.

At the station Mrs. Kingdon drew Pen aside.

"You must tell Kurt, you know," she cautioned.

Pen looked plaintive, but the conductor's "all aboard" call ended the conversation.

"We'll say our prayers and our lessons like mother told us," said Francis as they motored home, "but of course we can't be too good all the time. I am going to ride a horse, a real horse — not a pony."

"I am going to sit up late nights," declared Billy.

"And I shall wear your clothes and play I am a boy," Betty informed him.

"Well," thought Pen, "after all these Declarations of Independence, I feel I must get in the forbidden fruit game, too. I know what I'll do. I'll not tell Kurt — not right away, at least."

Half way to the ranch they stopped at Mrs. Merlin's cottage.

"She certainly looks the part of propriety to perfection," thought Pen, as she surveyed the tall, angular, spectacled woman, who came

to the car, and whose grim features relaxed slightly after a keen glance at the young girl.

"I'll have four children this time instead of three," she said.

"What would she think," reflected Pen, "if Kind Kurt should tell her what kind of a child the fourth one is!"

Back at Top Hill, Pen packed the luggage to be expressed to Mrs. Kingdon, and Jo made another trip to town, planning to go from there to Westcott's.

At dinner time Kurt arrived, and Pen chuckled as she easily read his dismay at the situation.

"He's foreseeing and dreading all sorts of terrible things I may do or am capable of doing. Just because he is looking for trouble, I have no desire to give it. I'll play a new role and show him what a tame, good little girl I can be; maybe I'll like being one and it'll turn out to be a real reform. It would be awfully odd if he found his pedalled ideal in The Thief!"

She was conscious of his searching eyes upon her. She looked demurely down. In a soft, subdued voice she read little stories to the children, and when their bedtime hour came, she went upstairs with them.

Later she joined him on the library veranda where he was smoking his pipe, for it was one of the few nights when it was warm enough for such indulgence.

She went up to him unfalteringly.

"I have put myself on honor while Mrs. Kingdon is away," she said gravely. "I will try hard to do as you want me to do, but it will be easier for me if you will trust me."

Her eyes looked out so very straight, with none of the worldly wisdom he had seen in them the day she had been transferred to his guardianship, that he found himself incapable of harboring any further doubt of her sincerity.

"I will," he said staunchly; "I will trust you as she does."

They sat together in the moonlight with-

out further converse and in the resposeful silence a mutual understanding was born.

Presently she went inside and played some old-time airs on the piano with the caressing, lingering touch of those who play by ear.

"Where did you learn to play?" he asked wonderingly.

She looked up, slightly startled. She hadn't heard him come in and her thoughts had been far away from Top Hill.

"I never did learn," she said, rising from the piano. "I play by ear. I see it is late. I must go upstairs. Good night, Mr. Walters."

"Good night, Pen," he said kindly.

He returned to the porch and pipe and lost himself in a haze of dreams — such dreams as had been wont to come to him in his younger days when he had been a cow-puncher pure and simple. Gathered about a roaring camp fire that lighted up the rough and boisterous faces of his companions, he had seemed as one of them, but later when they had gone to well-earned slumber and it

had been his turn to guard the long lines of cattle in the cool of the cottonwoods, he had used to gaze into the mysteries of a desert moon slowly drifting through a cerulean sky and dream a boy's dream of the woman who was to come to him.

As he grew older and came more into contact with the world, he was brought to an overwhelming realization that the woman of his dreams did not exist. The knowledge made an ache in his heart, but to-night he was again longing with the primary instinct that would not be killed,— longing for the One.

Pen went to bed and to sleep. The next day she was a perfect model of a young housewife. She helped the children with their little lessons, filled all the vases, trained some vines, and then with some needlework went out on the veranda. At the table she listened and responded interestedly to Mrs. Merlin's bromidic remarks, was gentle with the children and most flatteringly deferential

to Kurt. Of her former banter and coquetry toward him there was no trace. After the children had gone to bed, she played cribbage with Mrs. Merlin while Kurt read the papers.

When she was undressing that night she examined her shoulders in the mirror very closely.

"There should be little wings sprouting. I was never even make-believe good before. The relapse will be a winner when it comes. If I could only steady down to something like a normal life. But I never shall."

She was standing pensively by a rosebush the next morning feeling appallingly weary of well-doing when Kurt in his riding clothes suddenly appeared before her.

"Would you like to ride this morning?" he asked. "Work is slack just now."

With a rush of joy she got into her boyish looking outfit and mounted the horse he had chosen for her, a thoroughbred animal but one far different from those she had tried

out on field day. She was very careful not to try to outride the foreman, or to perform any of her marvels of horsemanship. They had a long exhilarating ride over the foothills, and she felt the blood leaping again in her arteries at the turning from the comfortable channels of house life into the lure of the open.

"I was never meant for indoors," she thought. "I think I can stand it up here a while longer if he'll give me more of this exercise."

That night as they sat in the library alone, he lost his habitual reticence and talked — through her guidance — of himself and his life.

"Does it satisfy you always," she asked. "Wouldn't you like the power of ruling fates and fortunes in a city way?"

"No;" he replied, almost fiercely. "When a man has circled the herd and risen in his stirrups to throw a lariat and watched through the night by the light of camp fires, nothing

else calls to him quite the same way. I couldn't endure to live a bottled up life — the life of cities. Men of my kind are branded; they may wander, but they always come back. After you once get on intimate terms with the mountain and the blue overhead, other things don't satisfy."

She drew him into further conversation regarding his former life, responding briefly but with an undercurrent of interest that put him on good terms with himself.

In the days that followed, these rides became frequent, and despite the fact that they seldom spoke, they unconsciously grew into a closeness of companionship which saved her from the ennui of unwonted domestic environment. The intense vitality of the young foreman attracted her, and she began to have a friendly sympathy for him, and even to feel a tranquil satisfaction in his reposeful silence. At times she was sorely tempted to show him the same little impish self she had portrayed on their first ride up the trail,

and sometimes her conscience would sting her that she had failed to confide in him as Mrs. Kingdon had advised, but his gray eyes looked out so very straight and with such calm kindliness — the gaze of a man who has lived the simple life in the open — and with so little affinity to the eyes of the world-wise, that she found herself incapable of carrying out her intentions.

One night when the men had arranged to have another dance, Pen paid unusual attention to her dress. She came downstairs, a slight little figure in a soft, flower-sprigged, old-fashioned muslin (designed originally for bedroom windows and donated by Mrs. Kingdon), her hair softly brought to the crown of her head, with little curling rings about her brow. A freshness like the first faint fragrance of young spring seemed to hover about her. Kurt surveyed her with a look akin to adoration. Then his eyes dropped.

"Don't dance with the boys to-night," he said abruptly.

"I must play the *ingénue* part for which I am costumed," she thought.

"Mrs. Kingdon told me," she said gently, "that the boys had so few opportunities for partners, I must divide my dances equally."

"There's a party of tourists — teachers — at Westcott's. I've asked them over. The boys can dance with them."

"Well," she assented graciously, "I'll just dance with Betty and Francis and Billy — "

"And me," he finished.

"Thank you. I didn't know that you danced."

In the dance hall she looked eagerly about, hoping that Jo might have been invited, but she was disappointed.

"I am not dancing," she thought, when Kurt was guiding her over the floor. "I am just being deliciously carried about. It's very restful, but not exhilarating. Oh, Jo, where art thou? It was like drinking champagne to dance with you, but I suppose continuous champagne is bad for one."

Later that night when she was taking off her dancing slippers her thoughts were still of the man with whom she had danced so many times.

"He's kind and good and strong — a suppressed strength. He looks passion-proof; but if he ever falls in love! And what a triumph for a thief to capture an adamantine heart! But I don't want that kind — nor any kind."

Down in the bunkhouse, Kurt was recalling the feel of her little hand that had left a trail like fire upon his arm and had filled him with a sensation of ecstasy. A new divine sweetness seemed born into the air. He looked out of his window up into a star-flecked sky and renewed his old vow of allegiance to The Woman.

CHAPTER VII

The next day Francis carried out his cherished intention of being a "bit bad," and in violation of orders, surreptitiously mounted a "real horse" instead of his well-behaved little pony, and set out on adventure bound.

The horse, surprised at his burden, cantered casually along at first; then, resenting the intrusion, began to toss his head, snort and curvet about. The lad, a little frightened but game, kept his seat and the horse, seemingly ashamed to trifle longer with so small a foe, resumed his easy canter, though at a swifter pace than Francis was wont to ride. All might have ended well, had not Kurt in his home-made car suddenly sounded a blatant horn as he came around a curve. To his vision was disclosed a plunging horse and a small, fair-haired atom of a boy clinging to his neck. There was a forward plunge and

the horse thundered on like mad along a narrow slant of road with never a slackening of speed.

Kurt cranked up for pursuit, but his crude craft was not built on speed lines, and he saw the distance fast eaten up between him and the frenzied horse. Then, with tiger swiftness, Kingdon's car, a motor of make, passed him, Gene at the wheel, Pen beside him. The sight gave him no hope. They could doubtless overtake the horse, but they could not stop him and if they could, the boy would be thrown.

Pen's clear young voice came like a clarion call:

"Stick tight, Francis! Burr-tight! We'll get you all right."

Gene steered the car to the cliff side of the road to prevent the peril of a plunge by the horse.

When the long, low racing car was nearly up to the Mazeppa flier, a thrill ran through Kurt as he saw Pen step out on the running

board. He forgot the boy's danger as he divined her purpose.

The car closed in on the horse. The girl leaned far out, snatched the boy from the horse and climbed back into the car which now slowed up.

It was done in a second, so swiftly, so aptly that Kurt could only sit and gape with the sort of fore-knowledge that it must come out all right, as one gazes at a thrilling scene in a motion picture. When he came alongside the car, Gene looked up with a challenging grin. Francis, though pale and breathing quickly, wore a triumphant look. Pen's expression was entirely normal.

Kurt tried to speak, but his voice was dry in his throat.

"I stuck on, didn't I?" clamored Francis in satisfied tone.

Then Kurt recovered and began to reprimand the lad, but a certain sparkle in Pen's eyes as she clasped the lad to her restrained him.

He turned upon Gene.

"Did you know she was going to do that?"

"Sure!" was the confident reply. "I knew she could do it."

He flung Kingdon's racer into motion and slid on down the white ribbon of road to the ranch, while Kurt's little machine rattled and creaked and jolted along.

"He'll be sore at coming in after the black flag," chuckled Gene. "Kurt ain't used to being second, but I don't often get a chance at this car."

Kurt didn't come up to the house all that day until long after the dinner hour. He found Pen alone in the invitingly-furnished sitting room, the amber light from a shaded lamp bringing out the gleaming gold in her hair.

She looked up with a shy smile of welcome, and instantly he felt the charm a woman could bring to a room like this — a room full of rest and harmony — a haven to a man wearied from the day's work.

He sat by the table opposite her — too content to desire his pipe.

"Where are they all?" he asked presently.

"Francis was tired and repentant after the excitement wore off and was quite ready to go to bed early. Billy and Betty followed suit. Mrs. Merlin has a headache."

"How did you come to be riding with Gene this morning?" he asked abruptly.

"Mrs. Merlin asked us to go to her cottage for some things she needed. She thought Gene wouldn't be able to find them."

The natural tone of her reply and her utter lack of surprise or resentment at his question quite appeased him.

"It's a little cool to-night," he said suddenly. "Wouldn't you like to have a fire?"

She thought it would be nice, and interestedly watched him build one in the big fireplace.

He formed a fortress of logs with the usual huge one for a background. When he had a fire to his liking he came and sat beside her.

"That was wonderful — what you did this morning," he said abruptly.

"No; it was simply instinctive."

"It was a hair-breadth thing to do, but very brave."

"It wasn't bravery," she denied after a moment's reflection. "It was — I can't tell you just what it was."

"It made me bless the fate that led me to you that day."

"Then," she said lightly, but coloring confusedly, "I am glad I was able to do it — to repay you and Mrs. Kingdon in part. But where have you been all day?"

"I have been down in the farthest field."

"Working?"

"Yes; and thinking. Thinking of you — and what you did."

"Where did you have dinner?"

"I have had none. I am only just aware that I would like some. I came through the kitchen on my way in, but the cook didn't seem to be about."

"They are having some sort of entertainment in the mess hall."

"I am glad you didn't go," he said impetuously.

"I thought you would rather I didn't go," she replied docilely. "I will try to find you something to eat. Will you come and help me? Cook says you are a champion coffee maker."

They went through the kitchen into a smaller room.

"Betty calls this the 'kitchen yet!' But can you cook?" said Kurt.

"I am glad I won't be called upon to prove it. The larder's well larded, and I will set this little table while you make the coffee."

By the time the coffee was made, she had set forth an inviting little supper. She sat opposite him and poured the coffee. It seemed to him some way that it was the coziest meal he had eaten since his home days — the early home days before his mother died and he had gone to the prunish aunt.

"We must leave things as we found them," she told him when they could no longer make excuse for lingering.

"I feel in a very domestic mood," he said, as he wiped the few dishes.

"Do you know I have a very hearthy feeling myself. I know why a cat purrs. Everything is shipshape now. I'll say good night, and—"

"Come back to the fire," he entreated. "I want to smoke."

Back in the library Pen made herself comfortable on one of the window seats, pulling up the shade to let the moonlight stream in.

He followed and sat beside her, watching in silence the pensive, young profile, the straight little features, the parted lips, as she gazed away over the moonlit hills. He felt a strange yearning tenderness.

"Pen!"

She turned, a sweet, alluring look in her eyes.

"Pen!" he said again.

"Yes — Kurt."

Some alien, inexplicable force seemed to battle with his nature. His lips quivered and then compressed as if in a mighty resolution.

A moment later she slid from the window seat to the floor.

"It is late; good night!" she said quietly.

He rose, took her hand in his and said earnestly:

"Good night, Pen. I wish — "

Again he stopped abruptly.

"I know what you wish," she said in a matter of fact way; "you are wishing that I had never been — a thief."

The color flooded his face; embarrassment, longing and regret struggled visibly for mastery.

"Good night," she repeated, as she quickly sped from the room, leaving him speechless.

Upstairs in her room she stood by the window.

"Kurt," she soliloquized, "you've been weighed and found wanting. You don't know

what love is. No man does. It is a woman's kingdom."

Then a radiant smile drove the reflective shadows from her eyes. There had burst forth a whistle, clear, keen, inspiring. Only one person in her world was so lark-like, so jubilant, so joyous of nature as to improvise such a trilling melody.

With an expectant smile she looked out and saw Jo crossing the moonlit lawn.

"Halloa, Jo!" she called softly.

He looked up, extended his cap at arm's length with a gay flourish and called:

"Bless your little heart of honey! What are you doing up so late?"

"Is it late?" she asked in arch surprise. "I'm so sorry, for I was going to say I'd come down for a little walk with you."

"'Deed, it's never too late for that; but say, little Penny Ante, Kurt is sitting in the library window —"

"I am not coming into view of the library window. Wait a moment! Catch this."

She picked up her sweater from the window seat and threw it down to him, stepped nimbly over the railing of the little balcony, made a quick spring, caught the branch of a nearby tree and slid down to earth.

"Say, you little squirrel! You'd make some sailor. It's hungry I've been for sight of you. I met Gene in town this afternoon and he told me about the wonderful stunt you pulled off this morning for Francis."

"That was nothing. But — have you come back, Jo?"

"Not yet. I'm motoring in from town and left my car down in the road. I just thought I'd pass by your window and let out a whistle for you."

"Jo, I came down to say something serious — "

"You can say anything you like to me, Miss Penny Ante," he replied encouragingly. "Come away where no one can overhear our voices."

They strolled away out of the moonlight

to the shelter of some shrubbery where they talked long and earnestly. On the way back to the house, Pen, lifting her eyes to his, was struck by the look in his boyish face.

"Jo," she said, a slight wistfulness in her tone, "you really love — the way a woman loves."

"What's the use," he said defiantly, "if the one I love won't have me — she — "

He stopped short and looked at her keenly.

"You know, Jo, you must learn to be patient and await — developments."

A light leaped to his eyes.

"I'll wait! But the limit mustn't be too far. Do you know what Gene confided to me to-night? He thinks that Kurt is in love with you!"

She laughed mirthlessly.

"Kurt! He wouldn't know how to love. If he did, he wouldn't let himself. He would hang on to his love like a Jew to a bargain. Who would want a grudging love?"

"Kurt is my pal — he — "

"He won't be if he finds us lingering here. You reconnoitre and see if he is still in the window. I don't intend to shinny up this tree. It's so much easier going down than up."

"You can go in the kitchen way. It's cook's affinity night, and she's somewhere with Gus."

"The kitchen is where I go in then. Jo, are you very sure that you are in love — enough to marry a thief? You're only a boy. Better keep your love until you are older."

"I am not a boy. I am two and twenty."

"Quite an old man! I'll see you very soon again, and maybe I can give you — your answer. Kurt goes to town early in the morning. Meet me in the pergola near the garage. Good night!"

By way of the kitchen and back stairs she reached her room undetected.

"Dear old Jo! Poor Kurt!" she thought sleepily, as she stretched herself luxuriously to rest. "It's a very small, very funny old

world, and the thief is certainly getting in deep waters."

On the trail to Westcott's, Jo was chuckling to himself.

"The little thief! If she isn't the slickest little lass I ever saw!"

In the library, oblivious to time and place, Kurt still lingered, his dream-like memories trying to learn the tune that Pan was piping on his reeds.

CHAPTER VIII

At the breakfast-table Pen found at her plate a little bunch of flowers, clumsily arranged and tied.

"From Jo," informed Betty — "The Bulletin," as her father was wont to call her. "He came just after Uncle Kurt started for town."

Pen smiled as she took up the little stiff nosegay. She held it lightly for a moment, looking down at the blossoms. There was a mute appeal in the little messengers from the boyish lover. Something infinitely tender stirred in her heart for a second, bringing a tear to her eye, as she mused upon his boyish faith in love.

She put the flowers in the glass of water beside her plate, and gave her attention to the prattle of the children.

After breakfast she pinned the little nose-

gay to her middy and went down to the pergola.

Jo saw her coming and hurried forward to meet her, his eyes brightening when he saw the flowers.

"Thank you, Jo. They are very pretty."

"Thank you for wearing them."

"I asked you to come here this morning, Jo, so you would do me a favor."

"You know I would."

"Will you mail this letter for me? I wrote it last night after you left, and you are the only one I can trust. And — Jo — will you please not read the address?"

He put the letter in his pocket.

"You can trust me."

"You had better go, because I hear the rattle that can be made only by Kurt's car. He must have come back for something. You can go around the bend here."

"Say, Penny Ante, I don't like this deceiving him — "

"Just a bit longer, Jo," she said persua-

sively. "Mrs. Kingdon said to wait until her return."

He followed her instructions, and she returned to the house.

"It's a great possession," she thought musingly, "the big love of a true and simple heart like his. It would probably be idyllic to live a life of love up here in these hills with the man of one's choice, I suppose, but a happiness too tame for me. To be sure, there would be the excitement of trying to ruffle the love-feathers, but that, too, in time would pall. I wonder how much longer I shall stay hidden up here before my past finds me out. Any minute something is sure to drop and I will be called back — back to my other life that is less enticing now I have had a taste of domesticity.

"But," she reflected, "domesticity doesn't satisfy long. This semi-security is getting on my nerves. Hebby isn't so good a trailer as I feared he would be, or he'd have tracked me up here."

Her meditations were diverted by a tattoo upon her door which she had locked so that the ever-present, ever-prying Betty and the all-wise Francis could not intrude.

"Aunt Penny, let us in!" came in aggrieved chorus.

"I've a message for you, Aunt Pen. Open the door," came Francis' insistent voice.

The pounding and the voices forced a capitulation. She admitted the trio.

"Mrs. Merlin is going to take us to her house for the rest of the day," informed Francis, "and we will have a picnic dinner there. She would have asked you, too, only Uncle Kurt came back and wants you to ride with him. He didn't have to go 'way to town, 'cause he met the man he wanted to see on the way here."

"Now what has come over the spirit of *his* dreams?" Pen asked herself wonderingly as she got into her riding things. "Well, there is always the refuge of fast riding. That is the only time I can make my tongue

behave. I'll give him no chance to preach, that's sure!"

When they set out on their ride, she was careful not to let the brisk pace falter. They stopped for luncheon at a ranch-house where there were many people at the table; but on the way home, when nearing the big bend, Kurt rode up to her; his detaining hand on the bridle slackened the speed she was striving to maintain.

"I want to say something to you," he began stiffly. "You mustn't think because I say nothing, that I am unmindful of what you have overcome — I —"

She stole a side glance at him. His eyes were as sombre and impenetrable as ever, but his chin worked nervously.

"You mean that I deserve a credit mark for not having lifted the children's banks, or helped myself to the family silver and jewels. It's sweet in you to put such trust in me and commend me for such heroic resistance!"

She jerked her bridle from his grasp and rode furiously on to the house, and had dismounted and escaped to her room before he could overtake her.

CHAPTER IX

Pen found the ranch-house quite deserted the next morning. Kurt had gone to Wolf Creek to purchase cattle and would not return until night. A little scrawled note from Francis apprised her of the fact that Mrs. Merlin was taking himself, Billy and Betty to spend the day at her own home.

"A whole day alone for the first time in ages!" she thought exultingly. "It is surely Pen Lamont's day. What shall I do to celebrate? Stop the clock and play with the matches? I must do something stupendous. I know. I will go into town and shop. I will go in style, too."

She took Kingdon's racing car out of the garage, and was soon speeding down the hills with the little thrill of ecstasy that comes from leaving a beaten track.

In town she left the car in front of the

hotel and went down the Main street, looking in dismay at the windows loaded with assorted and heterogeneous lots of feminine apparel. At last she came to a little shop with but three garments on display, all of them quite smart in style.

"You must be a 'lost, strayed or stolen,'" she apostrophized in delight.

She went within and purchased two gowns with all the many and necessary accessories thereto.

"Lucky, Kind Kurt and Bender didn't search me that day," she thought. "I never saw a sheriff or a near-sheriff so slack. If they'd been in my business, they'd have known that you can't always tell what's in the pocket of a ragged frock."

She visited in turn a shoe store, a soda water fountain and a beauty shop. Then it was the town time for dining, and she returned to the hotel.

"I shouldn't have exhausted the resources of the town so soon," she thought ruefully,

as she stood in the office after registering. "I don't know what I will do this afternoon unless I sit in a red plush chair in the Ladies' Parlor and gaze out through the meshes of a coarse lace curtain at the passers-by. I might call on Bender and see if he'd remember me. Bet his wife would. Maybe something interesting will come along, though."

Something did. It came in the shape of a lean, brown-faced young man.

"Larry, Larry!" she cried. "It's a homecoming to see you. I hadn't any idea what part of the world you were in. What are you doing here?"

"The Thief!" he exclaimed, his dark eyes beaming with pleasure.

"Not so loud. I am Pen Lamont, at present. Incog, you see, under my real name, the least known of any. So don't squeal on me."

"I never gave anyone away yet, Pen, dear. What are you doing in this neck o' the woods?"

"I am in hiding in the hills — at a ranch — quite domesticated. My first glimpse of a home. Like it better than I supposed I could."

"You'd better watch out. Hebler is up in these parts somewhere, I hear. He'll get you yet, Pen!"

"Hebler! You make my heart stop beating. I hit this trail more to escape him than anything else. What is he here for?"

"For you, I fancy. I ran across Wilks the other day and he said he heard Hebler say, 'He'd get that thief if he never did another thing.' So lay low. Are you here alone in town to-day?"

"Alone and untethered for the first time in ages. Same with you?"

"You're right as to the alone part; but I am not altogether free. I have to give an exhibition fool flight this afternoon in my little old flier. We'll have dinner together, and the rest of the day. Will you?"

"Will I? Try me."

"What's the idea, Pen?" he asked as they

went into the long dining-room and chose a remote table.

"I don't know, Larry. I had one, but I seem to have lost it in trying to pick up others. I'm floundering."

"You've always been in wrong, Pen. Wish you'd find your level. You made me ashamed of my old life. I am string-straight now, thanky."

"I am glad, Larry. You never were crooked, you know — just a bit reckless. Tell me about yourself."

"You gave me a good steer when you suggested this sky stuff. I don't believe a flying man could be very bad — up there in the clouds in a world all his own. Whenever I felt as if I must break over the traces and go off for a time, I'd just get into my little old flier and hit the high spots and that would give me more thrills than all the thirst parlors ever brought. I am going soon to fly for France. In fact, I'm 'on my way' now."

"Larry! I *am* proud of you! But it tugs

at my heartstrings to have you go, and in an aeroplane!"

"Did you ever go up, Pen?"

"No; it's about the only exciting thing I haven't done, and it's the only stunt I ever lacked the nerve to tackle."

"Terrors of the unknown? I'm booked for some of that fancy flying this afternoon, and you can watch me from the field."

"I knew this was to be a real day, but I never hoped for such a big handful of luck as seeing you again and in such a good act."

"Always invest heavily in hope, Pen. It is free to all, and you come out ahead because you get your dividends in anticipating anyway, and you know anticipation —"

"Hold on, Larry, don't be a bromide!"

"Everyone is a bromide now. Sulphides are all in the asylums. I am hoping for a chance to win the *medal militaire* — I mean for the chance to do something worth getting one."

Pen's pleasure in her surreptitious expedi-

tion, the delight in shopping and the excitement of meeting some one from her former life had brought a most vivid beauty to her delicate face, and Larry looked at her with an approval that brought forth a sudden wonder.

"Say, Pen!" he exclaimed excitedly, "you haven't got a man up there at your ranch, have you?"

"Certainly; two of them," she replied assuredly.

"That's all right. So long as there are two, it's nothing serious. Safety in numbers, remember."

After dinner they motored out to the field where the exhibition was to be given. A coatless, tanned, weather-beaten crowd had already gathered.

Pen stood apart from the spectators, watching Larry whirl, turn turtle, and perform all the aviation agonies so fascinating to the untutored. When he shut off the engine and swung down, skimming the ground for a way

and stopping gently, she was in waiting nearby.

"I loathe this kind of exhibition work!" he declared. "It's silly stuff, but it's what the public wants. Sure you don't want to try a little straight flight?" he tempted.

"N — o, Larry. Vice versa for mine, as the Irishman said."

"All right. Here, Meder!" he said to the mechanic, who had come up. "Take care of the flier. I'll see you later at the hotel."

"It was wonderful, Larry," said Pen as they were motoring to town. "I seem to see you from such a new angle now. I have always thought of you as a lovable, happy-go-lucky boy, but when I saw you take the air, I knew you had come to be something far different. You have the hawk-sense of balance, the sixth sense — the sense woman was supposed to have a monopoly of till the day of aeroplanes arrived. You had nerve to go up there and yet you were not nervous."

"A fellow has to be without nerve and yet

nervy," explained Larry. "If he loses his sense of equilibrium up there, it's all off; yet he has to be always ready to take a chance and to find one."

"And, Larry — when you fly to the colors — "

"To the tri-colors," he interrupted.

"It will bring out the biggest and bravest and best there is in you, Larry. I am so glad! Don't go out of my life again. Let me hear from you when you get over."

"I was sore, Pen, when you handed me such a lecture, though it was coming to me all right. But it stuck, and the time came when I was grateful. When I found I could make good, I couldn't find you. I wrote every one of the crowd or went to see them, but you had mysteriously disappeared. Hebby said you must have been run in."

"Was; but luck was with me again. I will give you an address that will always reach me."

"I shall never go up, Pen, without thinking

of you and to-day. But you have told me very little of yourself. Are you still — "

"The thief? Not at present. I am enjoying an interlude; but there are times when virtue palls, but I mean to keep out of Hebler's clutches. Larry, I believe I will let you out here — on the edge of the town — the main street. I have a long ride before me. It's lonesome to say good-bye."

"I expect to be in two or three days yet — waiting for some mail."

"I wish I might see you again, Larry, but I don't know how I can manage it. If anyone knew I were in town to-day, it might lead to — developments. Send me your address at the port you are to sail from, and I'll have things there for you."

"Good-bye, Pen. You're the best little scout I ever knew."

He kissed her and got out of the car. There were tears in her eyes as she motored on up through the hills land. The air grew cold and brisk; she felt the sense of silence and

strength. She recalled her first ride up these hills in the early morning, and that turned her thoughts to Kurt. She wondered if he were of the stuff that bird men are made of. How much more sphinx-like he was, and how different from the keen, alert, business-like flier Larry had shown himself to be! They were types as remote as the eagle and the lark. Larry, of course, was the lark. She had a feeling of loneliness in her knowledge of his going so far away. He knew more about her than any one else. She never had to play a part with him.

Soon, all too soon, she found herself at the ranch. Dinner was over and the children had gone up-stairs with Mrs. Merlin.

Kurt returned a few moments later and came into the library where she sat alone by the open fire, pensive and distrait, still thinking of Larry and of his going into service.

He looked at her oddly. This was not the pert, saucy, little girl he had taken from Bender, nor the little playmate of the children,

nor yet the quiet, domestic woman who had served him that night in the kitchen.

There was an indefinable charm about her that defied definition or analysis — a rapt, exquisite look that lifted her up — up to his primitive ideal.

"Pen!"

He started toward her, seemed to remember, hesitated and then asked lamely:

"What have you been doing all day?"

Her former little air of raillery crept back momentarily at his change of tone.

"A narrow escape," she thought, as she said aloud, reckless of consequences: "I motored into town by myself; bought some new clothes; had dinner with an old friend; saw an areoplane go up and — "

He smiled in a bored way and asked her some irrelevant question.

"The easiest way to deceive, as Hebby always said, is to tell the truth," she thought.

"Pen!" He spoke with a return of his first manner. "I — "

"I am very tired," she quickly interrupted, "I think I will say good-night, now."

"Don't go yet," he urged, "I—"

"I want to be alone," she replied wearily.

"There is something I want to say to you. Jo Gary comes to-morrow!"

"Yes," she answered indifferently. "Mr. Westcott found another manager, did he?"

"You knew Jo was at Westcott's?" he gasped.

"Certainly. I've seen Jo a number of times."

"When, where?" he demanded in displeased tone.

"Let me think. Why, he came back from Westcott's the day after my arrival. Their manager postponed departure. So Jo was here for the dance, and on field day — and — I think he went back to Westcott's the day you came back. Wasn't it all right to see him?" she asked guilelessly. "Mrs. Kingdon didn't object."

"What other times did you see him?"

"I heard him whistle one night, and I slid down the big tree near my window. Then he came one morning to bring me flowers. I am glad he is coming for keeps. He livens things up, Jo does."

"Why did neither you nor he speak of your having met?"

"I begged him not to, because I felt that you wouldn't approve."

An intense silence followed.

"Do you think," he asked bitterly, "that you are fair to Jo—"

"To Jo?" she asked in surprise. "I don't understand."

"You do understand. Jo told me what he asked you in Chicago and how you left him—to reform—to be worthy of his love."

"I haven't deceived Jo," she replied slowly. "I told him where you found me and why. He doesn't care. He understands. Jo loves—"

The pause that followed was so prolonged that she stole another side-glance. She had a

sudden, swift insight into the power and vigor of the man — the inner man.

"That the girl he loves," she continued softly, "is a thief, makes no difference to Jo."

"Remember, Jo is only a boy — younger than you in all but years."

"Only a boy, it is true, but with the faith and love of a man."

He started from his chair and came up close to her.

"Answer me," he said, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Do you love Jo Gary?"

A sort of paralysis seemed to grip her, and she felt helpless to move her eyes from his. Her lips were slightly parted and he could feel the pull of her nerves. For a moment she looked like a startled deer, quivering at the approach of man, with no place to run.

Then she recovered.

"Ask Jo," she said defiantly, and sped from the room.

"Jo didn't tell me how much he had confided in Kurt," she thought. "What a wee

world it is! I can't see how, with all the shuffling billions of people, the same two, once parted, should ever meet. I believe I was wrong about Kurt. For a moment I was almost afraid of him."

Kurt gazed into the fire, his gray eyes alert and a soft smile on his lips. He had not been misled. He had clearly read an answer in the young eyes looking into his own.

"She doesn't love Jo," he thought, and the knowledge was quickly darkened by the remembrance of what it would mean to the boy-lover.

CHAPTER X

"Jo!" called Pen, running down the road as she spied him driving away in a light-weight mountain wagon.

Quickly he reined in the pair of prancing horses.

"What 'tis, Miss Penny Ante? Isn't it great that I am back to stay?"

"Indeed it is. Where are you going and may I go, too?"

"Over to Westcott's, and I'd love to have you go with me."

"I'll have to get a furlough and a hat. Just wait a moment."

She found Kurt and asked his permission with all the pretty pleading of a child in her voice. Her face was singularly young; her eyes like a mirror.

"I've never ridden in a wagon," she said breathlessly, seeing that his expression wasn't

as forbidding as usual. "And I'll come back. Can't you see I *want* to come back?"

Something sweet dawned in his eyes.

"Yes;" he said, a note of exultation sounding in his voice with the knowledge that his last stand of resistance to long-held theories was giving away before some new force, powerful and overwhelming. "You may go. I wish I were driving instead of Jo, but—"

He stood watching her as she sped back to where Jo was waiting, and his gaze still followed as the horses tore over the road to Westcott's. There was a far-away look in his eye and a faint smile about the curves of his mouth. Subconsciously, as though he were the one beside her, he followed in fancy after the wagon was lost to sight around the hills. He could see the point where the road would disappear into a plain, covered with soft grass over which the sleek horses would bound. He knew Jo's irresistible bubbling gaiety, and the sparkle she would add to it. He wondered why he had never thought to

take her for a drive. There had been no chance to talk to her in their rides. She always put spurs to her horse when he tried to talk to her.

All sense of time left him. The symphony of the hill winds from the south was in his ears; the beauty of the day in all his being. Vividly he recalled their ride in the early dawn and the brief moment she had lain unconscious in his arms. Ever since that moment he had barricaded himself against her appeal and charm. He felt himself yielding and knew that the yielding was bringing him happiness.

"I am in a Fool's Paradise," he thought, "but still a Paradise. She doesn't care for me any more than she cares for Jo. I wonder does he know it, or is she deceiving him? I fear so, for he seems absurdly happy."

He was still lost in the dreams of the lotus-eater when he heard something that resembled the rattling of his own noisy car. Looking down the hill road from town, he saw a

vehicle approaching which he recognized as the "town taxi." It turned into the ranch grounds and he quickly went to the front of the house, supposing that Kingdon or his wife must have returned.

A strange young girl was alighting. As he went wonderingly to meet her, he saw that she was city-bred. She seemed to be dazed by the illimitable spaces and was blinking from the sunshine. His observant eye noted the smart suitcase and the wardrobe trunk the man was depositing on the porch. There was city shrewdness in having had the amount of the fare fixed before leaving town.

She was a little slip of a girl with a small-featured face and a certain pale prettiness. There was an appealing tinge of melancholy in her eyes notwithstanding they were eager and alert. Her dress was plain, but natty and citified.

"Is this Top Hill — where Mrs. Kingdon lives?" she asked in a low, softly-pitched voice.

"Yes;" he replied, "but Mrs. Kingdon is away —"

"I know — but she wrote me to come here; that she would be home very soon."

"I am glad to hear that. Come in," he urged hospitably, as he picked up her suit-case. "The housekeeper will make you comfortable."

She hesitated.

"Is Miss Lamont in?"

"Miss Lamont — Miss Pen Lamont?" he asked in surprise. "She is a friend of yours?"

"Yes," she replied composedly.

"She has gone for a drive, but she will be back soon."

She followed him within and stood gazing at the pleasant interior, — books, pictures, piano and fireplace, while he went to summon the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Merlin, this is a friend of Mrs. Kingdon's," he said on his return. "Will you show her to one of the guest rooms?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl in expostulary tone, "I am *not* a guest. My name is — Bobbie Burr. Mrs. Kingdon hired me to do plain sewing for the children and to care for the linen."

There was no trace of a seamstress in the plain but elegant garb and appointments of the young girl, and Mrs. Merlin was at a loss as to the proper establishment of the newcomer.

"Maybe," she said to Kurt hesitatingly, "the room the last nursery governess had — "

"Any room will do," said the girl hurriedly, as she followed Mrs. Merlin.

Kurt went down the road which Jo and Pen had taken. He felt the need of a pipe and solitude to help him figure out this puzzling problem, and soon he was sending a jet of smoke up to the branches of the tree which he had selected for a resting place.

Who was this girl whose belongings betokened money, and yet who said she had come to do plain sewing? Enlightenment came with

the recollection that she had been sent by Mrs. Kingdon and was doubtless one of her protégées. The name she had given sounded demimondish, and she was a friend of Pen's! The thought made him wince. She had seemed to him some way isolated from her kind, with naught in common with them save her profession. To find he was mistaken brought him an unpleasant shock.

A sound of wheels around the curve; the clatter of hoofs. In a moment they came into his vision — the prancing team, the merry driver and — *the thief*. Delicate as a drop of dew, as lovely as a forest blossom, her voice, bird-like and rippling, wafted to him from the clear aromatic air, she inverted again all his theories and resolutions.

He walked toward them, his hand raised.

Jo reined in.

"Will you get out and walk up to the house with me?" Kurt asked her, the question given in the form and tone of command.

"A friend of yours is at the house," he

said abruptly, when Jo had driven on and was outside of hearing.

"A friend of mine!" she repeated, losing a little of the wild rose tint in her fear that Hebler might have arrived.

"So she says. Mrs. Kingdon sent her here to sew for the children."

"How you relieve me! I was fearing it might be a man."

"Her name," he said, "is Bobbie Burr."

"What!" Her voice had a startled note. "Bobbie Burr! Oh, yes; I remember her."

"Is she a particular friend of yours?"

"I am more attracted by her than by any girl I ever knew. Let's sit down in the shade of one of the few-and-far-between trees you have up here. You were interested in my welfare when you took me from Bender, but you will be doubly interested in Bobbie when you hear her story. She is a convert far more worthy of your efforts and those of Mrs. Kingdon than I have proved to be.

"She is the type you thought I was before

you snatched me from the burning — I mean from Bender. Let me see if I can quote you correctly: 'One of the many young city girls who go wrong because they have no chance; bred in slums, ill-treated, ill-fed.' Poor Bobbie had no chance until — you'll be skeptical when I tell you how she first received her moral uplift — she had some nice clothes. Stealing was her only vice! At that, she only took enough to meet her needs; but one day she *found* some money; quite a lot, it seemed to her. Down in her little fluttering fancy she had always had longings for a white dress — a *nice* white dress. She had the inherent instinct for judging rightly 'what she should wear.' So, for the first time in her life she was able to be correctly and elegantly clad. The white dress she bought was simple, one of the plain but effective and expensive kind. With the wearing of this new gown there naturally came the feminine desire to be seen and admired. She didn't know where to go. She

had never been a frequenter of dance halls. She knew, of course, there were few open sesames for her. She went to one where no questions are asked before admittance. Things didn't look good to her at this Hurricane Hall, and she thought her doll was filled with sawdust until the inevitable man appeared and changed her angle of vision. He was that most unusual apparition, a nice, honest man. He saw her; she saw him; after that there were no others visible in their little world.

"Within twenty-four hours he had told her of his love and asked her to marry him. Then — I tried to convince you thieves could be honest — she was brave enough to tell him what she was. He was a true knight and lover. Her confession didn't alter his feelings or his intentions; in fact, his determination to marry her was strengthened. Because she loved him very much, she ran away from him, leaving him in a strange city without even her name for a clue. But now she had a hope, a real incentive — the biggest one there is.

She pawned all the coveted clothes she had bought and went to a place far away where she could begin a new life — the life of an honest working-girl.

"In her little game with destiny, she lost out, and was apprehended for a theft of which she was entirely innocent, but her past record barred acquittal. A man was instrumental in gaining a reprieve for her, however, and she was sent away to new environment where she found friends, health and, best of all, a job.

"So the desire was born in her to turn the proverbial new leaf, not for the sake of winning her 'man,' but from the simple wish to be 'good.' I interested Mrs. Kingdon in her and told her where she was, but did not dream of such good luck for — Bobbie as to be sent up here. I know she will find happiness up here in these hills. You'll be kind to the little girl, won't you?" she pleaded. "You know you haven't much mercy for sinners, but you will see she is serious about reform-

ing; not flippant like me. She will never yield to temptation again."

"How do you know?" he asked, looking at her keenly.

"Because," she answered softly. "She *loves,* and — the man she loves is worthy of her."

"And you think love is powerful enough to cure?"

"I think so."

"Would it cure — you?"

"I don't know," she said ingenuously. "You see I have never loved."

A fervid light smouldered in his eyes.

"Aunty Pen!"

Francis came running around the curve.

"There is a nice girl at the house. Mother sent her. She's got a boy's name — Bobbie. I like her. She does anything I tell her to."

"That's the masculine measure," she said, taking his hand and running on with him.

"Come back!" was the strident summons from Kurt.

"Stay here a moment," Pen hurriedly bade Francis.

"I want to ask you how this girl is able to have such expensive looking things — if she has only a job?"

"They were given to her."

"By the man who was instrumental in getting her reprieved? You said she was virtuous."

"Don't do the man an injustice, even if you doubt poor little Bobbie. He acted from charitable motives. He has never seen her, or tried to see her."

"Look at me, Pen!"

"I'm looking. You have the true Western eye — the eye of a sharpshooter and a — sheriff."

"The story you just told me is the story of Marta Sills. Is that *her* name or yours?"

"It belongs to us both. Being 'particular pals,' we shared alike. Interchange of names often comes handy with us."

"Was it you or Bobbie Burr — the girl who

just came — whom Jo met in a dance hall, and took to St. — some place on Lake Michigan?"

"Dear me! You cattlemen are such gay birds when you come to a city! How can I tell how many girls Jo Gary took to a dance hall? If that St. Something was St. Joe, he must have gone there to get married. It's what most people go there for, and probably he's no more saintly than the place is. Maybe it was named after him."

"Tell me! Was it Bobbie Burr?"

"She never mentioned Jo Gary's name to me, so how do I know. Yes, Francis; coming."

She ran fleetly on to join the boy who was impatiently calling to her.

"Marta! How the plot does thicken!" she thought as she ran a race with Francis to the house. "Now we're all here but Hebby. What next? Curtain soon, I expect. No need longer for understudies. I must start things before Kurt succumbs to her charms. That little subdued, clinging-vine air she has

is most appealing to his type. He'll come to forgive *her* anything."

"Marta," she said quickly, as she met the young girl, "come upstairs with me."

She locked the door as soon as they were in her room.

"Now tell me all about yourself and everything that has happened since I last saw you."

Beaming with the excitement that comes from narrative of self, the new-comer talked animatedly for some time.

"And," she concluded, "Mrs. Kingdon said you told her all about me, and she sent me a ticket to come here. And it's lovely up here, isn't it? She told me I'd better keep to the name of Bobbie Burr for the present, until she came anyway."

"I should say!" agreed Pen. "Marta Sills might land you in most unpleasant places. But, Marta, that man you told me about, whose name you didn't mention?"

"Yes, Miss Lamont. I try not to think of him."

"Marta, why did you tell him that you stole. You could have married him. He'd never have known. And you and he could both have been happy."

In the girl's wondering eyes, Pen read a mute rebuke.

"I'd rather lose him forever than deceive him!"

"Marta," said Pen impressively, "Diogenes should have known you."

"Who is he, Miss Lamont?"

"Never mind, Marta. I thought I knew what love meant, but I see I didn't until now. If I loved a man as you do yours, I would stop stealing if I had to cut my hands off to do it."

"I have stopped. I know now that I could have stopped long ago, if any one had given me the right boost, or made me want to stop."

Just then Pen's eyes caught sight of a trunk in the corner of her room.

"What's that here for?" she asked.

"Oh, please, Miss Lamont, I brought it to

you. I never touched anything in it. I earned enough to buy what I am wearing and a few things in my suit case, besides what I had on that day — "

" Marta, that's sweet in you. I am beginning to feel I'd like to tog once more. I shall reward you. But first, will you do something for me? "

" You know I will be glad to do anything."

" I want a note delivered. I'll write it now."

Hastily she wrote a few lines at her desk.

" Come with me, Marta. We'll have to go to a certain vine-clad pergola by devious routes to avoid three wise children and one suspicious and formidable foreman."

By much circumambulation the two girls reached the pergola unseen.

" You sit here for a few moments, Marta, and the person to whom you are to give the note will come to you."

Pen walked on to the barracks where she met Jo.

"Will you do something for me, Jo? Right away, quick?"

"Sure thing, Miss Penny Ante. What did his nibs want?"

"Never mind, now. Go to the pergola and receive a note from me. Now don't be stupid. Do as you are told, — like a good soldier does."

With a laugh Jo started in swinging gait for the place indicated, but he was halted several times by some of the men who wanted directions for their work.

After waiting patiently, Marta concluded Pen's plans had miscarried, so she started for the house, but becoming confused as to turns, she went toward the barracks.

To a little girl whose life had been spent in slums and reformatories, the big spaces and silences were more appalling than the wildest hours of traffic on misguided State Street. She had a strange inclination to walk down hill backward that she might not see what other ascension must be made.

"If I'd only been born as high up as this, maybe I'd never have got down so low," she philosophized.

She came around a bend in the road. A man was approaching. He looked up.

"Marta, oh, Marta!"

"Jo!" she cried wildly, looking about for retreat.

Another second, in his arms, she thought no longer of flight.

"Marta, how did you ever get here?" Wild astonishment was visible in Jo's eyes.

"Mrs. Kingdon sent for me. I've been killed with kindness ever since that night I saw you, Jo. I didn't know you were here. Miss Lamont told me to stay in that place where the vines are until a man came, and to give him this note; but that was long ago. I came out and lost my way. Are you the man she meant?"

"I must be."

"Does she know that you — that we —"

"Sure she knows. Give me the note."

He removed the little folded paper from the envelope and read it aloud:

"DEAR JO: Here is your heart-ease. Don't let doubt kill your love. Just take Marta. A woman loves an audacious lover.

"Yours,

"PENNY ANTE."

"I feel sort of crazy. Gee, Marta, but it's great to be crazy! Let's sit down here and talk about it. You don't need to tell me much. She told me. Why didn't you let me hear from you?"

"I wanted to be sure, Jo. I'm not going to make excuses for myself, but I had it handed to me hard. Whenever I thought I'd like to be like other folks, some one would give me a shoveback, and then I felt cornered and that it was no use. Sometimes — most always — I was down and out. Then I'd hit a little lucky wave and go up. It was one of those times I saw you in that dance hall."

"That was *my* lucky wave. I can see you now as you sat away from the rest — so little and so different-looking from those tough ones."

"And I can see you — alone, by yourself; you looked different from anyone I'd ever seen, so healthy and jolly and kind. I saw you looking at me and knew right off what you thought — that I was straight and had got in the wrong place by mistake. And I let you think so and let you get to know me. And we danced and talked till near sunrise. That lovely day over at St. Joe! I thought I was in Heaven until we were in that little park and you asked me to marry you. First time a real man ever asked me that. I wasn't low enough to fool you then. When you said it made no difference, I knew you were too good for me, and it made me love you so much that I had to run away."

"It was sure great in you to tell me, Marta."

"You know how I got help and hope; but

I'm not Marta now, Jo. Not any more. I'm Bobbie Burr."

"You 'll always be Marta. But it makes no difference; you 'll soon be changing your name for keeps. You can't ever lose me, now, and love has Mrs. Kingdon and all the rest of them beat for what you call reforming."

"If I had only known long ago that there were folks like you and Mrs. Kingdon and — "

"Never mind long ago. There 's nothing to it. Let 's talk about the little shack we are going to put up in these hills somewhere. Like it?"

"It seems like a beautiful dream up here, Jo. Too good for me."

He looked down into the kitten face with its eyes of Irish blue.

"Nothing in the world is too good for you, my Marta."

"Miss Lamont said I could play I had died and been born again. She said it was a good way to turn over a new leaf."

"You will be born again as Mrs. Jo Gary."

Time went very swiftly then, and it was Marta who realized Pen might be expecting to see her.

"Please start me in the right direction, Jo."

"I'll take you to the house myself," said Jo protectingly.

As they came around a curve in the road that wound its way upward and downward, they encountered Kurt.

"This is Miss Sills, Mr. Walters," introduced Jo proudly — "the little girl I told you about when I came from Chicago. We are engaged."

She looked up a little fearfully at the stern-looking young foreman. She was surprised and relieved at the kindly look in the steel-gray eyes. He took one of her little hands in his strong brown ones. He was ashamed that his instinct told him it was the typical hand of a thief, slim, smooth and deft-fingered.

"Let me congratulate you, Jo, and you, too, Marta. Jo is my friend."

Tears came into her eyes and her little mouth puckered pathetically.

"Say, Kurt, you're a brick!" exclaimed Jo heartily. "I was afraid — you know you said — "

He stopped in confusion.

"Forget everything I said, old man. I was a grouch then and I didn't know — anything. I know better now. But Marta, why did you tell me your name was Bobbie Burr."

"Mrs. Kingdon told me to use that name until — "

"Until she has her right name, Marta Gary," finished Jo.

Kurt smiled condoningly.

"Mrs. Kingdon always knows what is best."

"That is what Miss Lamont said. She said that with Jo to love me and Mrs. Kingdon to advise me I couldn't help but be — what I want to be."

"Did she say that?" he asked eagerly, a light in his eyes. "She was right."

"She left out *her* help. It was Jo that first made me want to be straight, but it was Miss Lamont who gave me the chance. Isn't she grand, Mr. Walters? She has such a kind heart."

"Will you tell me something about her, Marta? Is—"

He stopped abruptly. It wouldn't be just the right thing to cross-examine this little girl about her "particular pal."

"I'll see you again, soon," he said, and went on to the garage.

The sound of Jo's jolly laugh with the little added tender note made him turn and look after them. They had stopped on their way and were looking into each other's eyes, oblivious to all else but the happiness to be found in the kingdom of love and youth.

Silhouetted on the crest of the hill they stood—Jo, lean, long and picturesque in his rough clothes; Marta, neat and natty from

her little pumps to her shining yellow hair smoothed back over her forehead.

With the feeling that he also was initiated into the Great Brotherhood and had recognized the tokens of membership, he went about his tasks, seeing a vision of a girl with a sweetness in her eyes that often belied the bantering of her tone.

When he came up to dinner, Pen's place was vacant.

"Bobbie won't eat with us," explained Francis. "Nora didn't, you know. Aunt Pen thought she might be lonesome eating her first meal all alone, so they are having their dinner together."

Marta's words, "she has such a kind heart," came back to him.

"She is right," he said. "Marta knows."

And suddenly there was born in him a deep compassion for all women of her kind. In vain he waited for Pen in the library that night. But, feeling she was in deep waters, Pen had resolved to stay in her room.

CHAPTER XI

Outside her door Pen found Betty waiting expectantly.

"Bobbie gave us a nickel apiece not to disturb you," she began glibly. "She said you had a headache last night. And father's come home and brought a man with him. And mother's coming soon."

Pen found herself only languidly interested in these announcements. She listened distraitly to the prattle of the children who surrounded her while she was served with toast and coffee.

"Father and the man are motoring around the ranch," said Francis, "but they will be back to lunch."

This roused her to the extent of making a more elaborate toilet than usual. She came into the library shortly before the luncheon hour, clad in one of the gowns she had taken

from the trunk Marta had brought, her hair done with exquisite care.

"Why, Aunty Pen!" cried Betty. "You look so different. You look grown up."

"I am, Betty," she said gravely.

"Miss Pen!" exclaimed Kingdon, coming forward. "Our hills have gotten in their curative powers speedily. I was afraid you were of the lily family, but I see you are a bud of the rose."

While she was replying to his banter, Kurt came into the room. She felt a little feminine thrill of pleasure in his look of unspoken admiration.

"I left my guest, Mr. Hebler, down at the stables," continued Kingdon. "Billy, run down and tell him it is nearly time for luncheon. I made a new acquaintance while I was away," he explained to Pen. "Bruce Hebler. I persuaded him to stop off on his way out to California."

Pen's eyes dilated slightly, and the color left her face, as she made some excuse for

leaving the room. Kurt followed, intercepting her in the hall-way.

"This Hebler is some one you have met before?" he asked, looking at her keenly.

"Yes; did I show it so plainly? I don't want to see him, or let him know I am here."

"You are afraid of him?"

"Y-e-s."

"He has some power over you — the power to take you away?"

"Yes; a power prior to yours."

"A legal one?"

"Yes."

"You can keep to your room," he said reassuringly. "That is, for the afternoon. Westcott has invited Mr. Kingdon and this man to dinner and for cards afterward. You can easily stay away from the breakfast room in the morning. I think he is going to leave in a day or so. I'll think up some excuse for your not appearing."

"Oh!" she said whimsically. "You will — lie for me?"

He flushed.

"I want Mrs. Kingdon to be your custodian — not this man."

"So do I," she said. "But I forget I am in custody up here."

"I am wondering," he said in a troubled tone, "how we can prevent the children from speaking of you before this man? And Kingdon, too, is sure to mention your name."

"Oh, that will do no harm. He won't know whom they mean. He doesn't know me by my own name. I told you I had a great many convenient aliases. Remember?"

"Yes," he replied shortly. "I remember."

She went to her room, and presently Marta came in with her luncheon, some books and a message of sympathy from Kingdon. In spite of these distractions, time dragged and it was with a sigh of relief that she saw Kingdon and his guest motoring toward Westcott's.

"Poor old Hebby! Just as hawk-nosed and lynx-eyed as ever. The last place he'd

think of looking for me would be behind these curtains. It's worth being a prisoner for an afternoon to know I have eluded him once more."

When she came down to dinner, Kurt was again visibly impressed by her appearance. She wore another of her recently acquired gowns, a black one of sheer filmy material. Her hair, rippling back from her brows, was coiled low. Her face was pale and yet young and flowerlike. There was a new touch of wistfulness about her — a charm of repose, almost of dignity.

Later, when the children had gone upstairs, she went into the dimly lighted sitting-room and sat down at the piano, touching softly and lightly the notes of a minor melody, an erratic little air rising and falling in a succession of harmonies.

"Pen!"

She turned exquisite eyes to Kurt's ardent gaze.

"I like you in this dress. I didn't know

dress could so alter a person." There was the tone of unrepressed admiration in his voice.

"Hebby is right," she thought with a fleeting smile. "He said there was something very effective about black to men — especially to men who know nothing about clothes."

"I must ask you something," he continued, speaking in troubled tone. "This man Hebler — does he know — "

She stopped playing.

"He knows me as you know me, as the thief, and he knows — something else about me."

Her fingers again found their way to the keys.

Reluctantly he found himself succumbing to the witchery of her plaintive tone and her quivering lips. Then he rallied and said relentlessly.

"Something worse?"

"Is there anything worse than stealing?" she asked artlessly. "His acquaintance with

me is not exactly of a personal nature. He admits but one of my shortcomings — that he never knows where to find me — literally. He'd think so more than ever if he could see me now."

"Does he love you?"

She stopped playing, rose from the piano bench and with an odd little laugh, crossed the room to the window seat. He followed.

"Hebby love me? Well, no! There have been times when I think he positively hated me. But I wish he hadn't come. He brings up — unpleasant memories."

"Then let's talk of something pleasant — very pleasant. About Marta, Jo's Marta. I met them together yesterday. I had my answer to the question I asked you."

"They are very happy," she said wistfully. "I am so glad."

"Pen, why did you make me think, that first day I met you, that it was you Jo met and loved in Chicago?"

"Did I make you think so? You assumed

I was the one and I — well, I wouldn't have presumed to dispute the assertion of anyone in a sheriff line. It's safer not."

"You asked me not to be hard on little Marta. Who could be? Not even the man you seem to think me to be. I'll do all in my power to help them to build a little home in the hills. And she does love him."

"Yes," she said softly. "She does."

He looked at her with a little ache in his throat. The moonlight was full on her partly averted face; her profile, clear-cut, delicate, was like a medallion.

"Pen — could you love me?"

The words seemed wrung from him in spite of an apparent determination not to utter them.

She turned and looked straight into his eyes.

"That isn't what you should ask me, unless you — "

"I do," he said passionately.

"You didn't — want to."

"No; frankly, I didn't want to; but I did — I do."

"Why?" she asked curiously, watching the fine little lines about his eyes deepen.

"I've been fighting it since I met you — because — "

"Because I am a thief," she finished unconcernedly. "Do you remember that night when we were here alone — you started to tell me you loved me, didn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted slowly.

"Then you *remembered* what I was, and your love wasn't big enough to let you finish."

"That wasn't the reason I hesitated," he said quickly, "then or — other times. The reason I didn't yield to my desire was because I knew it wouldn't be fair to Jo. Remember, I thought until Marta came that you were *his.*"

She looked her discomfiture.

"I forgot that," she said in a low sympathetic tone.

"No;" he resumed meditatively. "You don't know what a man's love is."

"A man's love," she replied, a slight catch in her voice, "is infinitesimal compared to a woman's."

"Let me show you, Pen. You shall love me! We'll go far away from here — "

"You're ashamed of me! Jo wouldn't ask Marta to go far away. Your's is a little love — a love that doesn't dare venture on an uncharted sea."

"Pen," he said tensely, "I tell you that I love you! Don't you understand?"

He put his arm about her — bent down.

There was a quiet reproach in her star-like eyes as she drew away.

"Pen, will you be my wife?"

She put her hand to her forehead with an odd little motion. Her paleness became a pallor.

"You ask me that — you would — "

"Yes, I would. I did fight it. I didn't really know you until to-night. You've been

unreadable. Now I feel you are your real self. Not the daredevil who defied me and mocked me. Not the little meek mouse on the hearth. I love the woman you are to-night."

"Am I like her — the best woman in the world?" she whispered.

"Yes," he cried triumphantly. "And you will grow more and more like her — the type of woman I want you to be. Don't you care for me — a little, Pen?"

Again his arm was about her. She turned to meet his eyes, deep-set — intense — burning.

"Kurt — I —"

A little wave of doubt, of contrition, stole over her.

"I don't love you," she said uncomfortably.

"Don't you want to love me, Pen?"

"No!"

She rose impulsively, and there were tears in her eyes, though there was a half wistful

smile on her lips, as she passed him swiftly and fled toward the stairway.

He followed.

"You mustn't leave me, this way. Pen—"

For a shining second she leaned against him.

"I must. I can't tell you now. I'll think it over. You surely want me to be *honest* with you!"

In the upper hall she passed the open door of Hebler's room. There were no inner lights, but the shafts of a moonbeam shone straight upon an article lying on a small table near the door, finding response in glimmering gleams.

She stopped, electrified.

"Oh!"

Fascinated by the sparkle, she lingered for a moment, and then went quickly to her room and straight to the window that looked on the moonlit hills. She stayed there awhile, her hands clenched, thinking intensely

and rapidly — of Larry soaring like an eagle, proud and secure in his conquering of the air — of Marta's sudden severance from the habit of a lifetime — of Jo's faith in her — of Kurt wrestling with his conflict between love and conventions. "Does he care, really, as much as he thinks he does," she wondered, "or is it just the lure of — propinquity? How shall I find out? Oh, there is too much on my mind! How careless and how like Hebby to leave his priceless ring about. What would he think if he knew the thief was next door to it?"

She left the window and went to the door.

* * *

The ring still sent forth shafts of sparkles.

A figure came stealthily out into the hall, paused near the open door. A hand reached quickly out and closed over the ring.

CHAPTER XII

"Have we a new maid, Kurt?" asked Kingdon at the breakfast table next morning. "I had a glimpse of a pretty little girl talking to Agatha."

"Mrs. Kingdon sent her here to do the sewing and look after the children," explained Kurt.

"And she's got a funny name," said Francis. "Her name is Bobbie Burr."

Hebler's fork fell with a clatter.

"Bobbie Burr!" he exclaimed in amazement.

"Bobbie Burr!" echoed Kingdon.

"Where is she? Let me see her at once. She's the very person I am looking for!"

"I'll go and get her," offered Billy, running from the room.

He returned in a few moments followed by Marta.

"Oh, you aren't Bobbie Burr!" said Hebler, visibly disappointed.

"No, sir," said Marta. "I just took the name because I liked it. My name is really Marta Sills."

"But it won't be that long," reminded Betty. "You're going to have another name soon. Jo Gary told me so."

"Oh, ho!" laughed Kingdon comprehendingly, while Marta fled in confusion.

"Jo's going to take her with him to Westcott's this morning," said Francis. "They're going to drive over in the buckboard. I think they are engaged."

"He hasn't given her a diamond ring," said Betty. "Every girl who is engaged wears a diamond ring. Doris told me so."

"Speaking of diamond rings," said Hebler, as they all rose from the table, "reminds me that I very carelessly left mine on a table yesterday and I forgot to put it away, or to even see if it were there this morning."

"It will be all right," assured Kingdon.

"Every one in the hill country is honest."

"Still you'd better put it away," cautioned Kurt anxiously.

"All right," said Hebler, leaving the room.

"Don't forget we want an early start for town," Kingdon called after him. "I'll go out and look over my car."

Kurt followed him, but lingered on the veranda to light his pipe. While he stood there, Jo and Marta drove past at a smart pace. A few moments later Hebler came to him in great consternation.

"Walters, that ring I was speaking of is gone! I've made a thorough search for it."

When he had assured Kurt that there could be no mistake as to having left it on his table before he started for Westcott's, the foreman said earnestly:

"I am quite sure that I can secure your ring for you, Mr. Hebler. I should like to settle this matter quietly, though; so please say nothing about it to anyone until I have investigated."

"Certainly," agreed Hebler. "I'll go on to town with Kingdon now, and you can be looking about for it."

Kurt hastened upstairs and knocked at Pen's door.

"Hebler has missed his ring — a very valuable diamond, he tells me," he said abruptly, as she came out.

"Oh!" she gasped, turning pale and trembling slightly.

"He left it on his table near the door and just thought of looking for it. I told him not to mention it for the present and I'd deliver the goods. Marta has gone away with Jo; evidently she intends to skip. She'll not get away with this. I am going after them in the car. I shall turn her over to the authorities. You can pack her things and send them after her."

"Oh, wait!" she cried, as he started to go down stairs. "It wasn't Marta. It was I."

"What!" he cried incredulously. "You!"

"Yes."

"When did you take it?"

"On my way to bed last night after I left you. His door was open — the ring on a table near by — in easy reach. He shouldn't have left anything like that around loose."

"I never dreamed of your taking it," he said bitterly. "I thought you had reformed."

She laughed, a little reckless laugh that had a sound like silver bells.

"I don't like that ring either. It's gaudy."

He looked at her with a new thought and hope.

"Are you a kleptomaniac?"

"I should think not! I never take anything unless it is of some value or use."

"Didn't it occur to you that you might be suspected and caught with the goods?"

"No; I thought I knew Hebby and that he was too much of a good fellow to report a loss at first blink. Sort of banal, you know. You don't know much of human nature to suppose a thief could undergo such a sudden

reformation. There are no modern miracles like that. Marta is the only one I knew who could change. But she isn't a born thief. I really was trying to be good; but I suppose I will slip and fall countless times — like a drunkard."

"This is the first time since you came here?"

"Absolutely; but to be honest, thieves don't always lie — I've not been so strongly tempted before."

"And you could do it then — right after —"

"After you had done me the great and regretted honor? Well, I didn't yield all at once. I walked right past it with the 'Get thee behind me' pose and closed my door and went to the window and — looked up at the hills and then — something stronger than all my resolutions carried me back to look at it once more. It was all off."

Anger and something else battled in his face.

"Why," she asked curiously, "did you suspect Marta instead of me?"

"I don't know," he said spiritlessly.

"You see Marta has an incentive to keep her straight — an incentive that I lack."

He winced.

"Have you," she asked cynically, "always been so straight that you don't know what temptation means? Have you never wanted anything so much that you — "

"That I wanted to steal? No; not even to steal your affections when I thought they belonged to Jo. I will spare you exposure. When I return the ring to Hebler I will tell him it was found on the floor by a servant."

"Thank you," she said meekly. "If he knew I were here, he'd know who the 'servant' was. What do you propose to do with me now? Return the goods to Bender, or squeal on me to Hebby?"

"I don't know until I have talked it over with Mrs. Kingdon."

"That is very considerate and fair in you,"

she commended. "Some way I feel confident she will think I should have another chance. You owe me something. 'Kind Kurt,'" she continued lightly, with a return of the flippancy that had so jarred him on their first meeting, "suppose I had been weak enough to accept your proposal last night? I knew my lapses too well and was too considerate of your happiness to say 'yes.' Suppose I had. Would your sense of honor have been equal to the sacrifice of keeping faith with me? No; I see by your face it would not have been. So you see your love — your *man's* love, isn't great enough for even a thief to consider."

"Give me the ring," he said coldly.

"No; I prefer to return it myself. I'll take my chances with Hebby. Even he isn't as merciless as you. And as I said, his claim is prior to yours. I never expected to take refuge with Hebby! Where is he now?"

"He has gone to the garage. Wait! You shall not go."

He put out a detaining arm, under which she ducked and fled nimbly down the stairs and out to the door. She heard him pursuing, but she jumped on Francis' wheel which stood near and was soon coasting down the driveway to the garage.

"Hebby! Oh — oh, Hebby!" she called to the man sauntering at some distance ahead of her.

"The thief!" he exclaimed as she came up to him and dismounted. "So, at last I've found you!"

"*Found* me! Well, I like that! Here I come chasing after you and doing the finding myself. Really lost your ring this time, Hebby? Didn't seem like your 'code' to mention your loss to so new an acquaintance. Sort of a breach, wasn't it?"

He flushed shamefacedly, but his discomfiture, short-lived, was succeeded by a broad grin.

"Then it was *you* who took it! That tall, solemn guy seemed to think he could recover

it, but I am more delighted at recovering you than a hundred rings."

"May I keep it, Hebby?"

"You always said you detested that ring — that it was very parvenu and so forth. But what are you doing up here, and how did you get in with these folks?"

"Can't a thief break in anywhere? It's far more surprising how *you* got in."

"You'll not escape me again. You'll go with me when I leave."

"Thank you, Hebby. I'm through here. Will you do me a favor?"

"You don't deserve favors."

"You never did favor the deserving, you know. Will you tell the 'tall, solemn guy' that you have your ring all right? I'll see you get it. I haven't it on me. But this is the real favor. No one here, except Mrs. Kingdon and one of the men on the place, knows very much about my chequered career and they only know me by my baptismal name."

"Which I'm not sure that I know, Meg. You have so many names."

"I took my own as a perfect disguise. It's Penelope Lamont."

"Fine name. I'll make a note of it for future use. I'll keep your secret if you'll not try to run away again. You haven't told me how you came here."

"I was — apprehended. But I am not on a thief's errand. It's for a reason apart from my other life. You know, Hebby, thieves do have a code of honor."

"You are the one and only thief! I take off my hat to you. Say, how did that tall guy know you had it?"

"He didn't. He suspected someone else. You can have it back, Hebby. It's so garish it puts my eyes out. I didn't want it. I just wanted to steal it."

"Ruling passion, Meg."

"No; you're way off. Here comes the 'solemn guy.' Tell him I found it and returned it to you."

Just then Kingdon drove around the curve.

"Glad to see you again, Miss Pen. I thought you had forsaken us. I see you've made Mr. Hebler's acquaintance. But I must take him away from you for a while."

As Hebler got into the car, Kurt came up.

"Oh, Mr. Walters, I'm happy to say I have my ring. Meg — Miss Lamont saw it and took it for a joke on me. Sorry I mentioned it."

A little wave of remorse swept over Pen for a second as she turned to Kurt and saw the look in his eyes when the two men had driven off.

"He seemed to have an air of proprietorship," he said jealously. "Has he really a legal right to take you away?"

"Looks that way. Mrs. Kingdon thought so. I never could get legal stuff through my head. It was for an offense committed long ago, but not outlawed. There is something I want to say to you. Last night you asked me to marry you. Don't look so afraid of

the cars! I am not going to sue you for breach of promise. I wouldn't marry the grandest man living unless he loved me supremely — enough, at least, to overlook the stealing of a ring. Kurt," she added after a pause, "did it occur to you I might have had a reason for stealing that ring? To put you to the test — your love, I mean — before answering you?"

"Pen —"

"Never mind, now. Jo wouldn't have gone back on me if he had been my lover. There's the ideal lover for you. There's one thing I didn't try to steal up here — Jo from Marta. Well, it's all over now, and I am going back — back with Hebby."

"You are not going away with that man," he said hotly. "Mrs. Kingdon arrives today. She will find a way out."

"I think not. You don't know Hebby. I think I want to go with him."

"You see," he said looking at her wistfully, "you didn't love me —"

"Then we're quits," she laughed, jumping quickly on the wheel and speeding toward the house.

"The beans are sure spilled now," she thought, when she had gained her room. "I've outwitted Kurt, and I must give Hebby the same treatment, but how can I make my getaway? Hebby in town — and such a small town. They took the racer. The big car is out of commission. Sandy rode to the corral in Kurt's shebang. No horse leaves the stables without Kurt's O. K. Oh, for the wings of a dove! There's my inspiration! I know some better wings than a dove's. I'll telephone Larry and literally fly from here."

She went into Mrs. Kingdon's room where there was an extension telephone and called up Larry at the hotel. Fortunately he was within call.

"Want to do something for me Larry, dear? Hebby is here! I'm in a mix-up as I generally am. No way out unless you'll

fly to me up here. I mean it. Inquire the way to Westcott's ranch — the next beyond Top Hill where I am. Land by a big red-roofed barn — only red roof in vicinity. I'll be there at three this afternoon, and be yours forever after if you'll have me. I knew I could count on you. This is really serious, Larry. If you love me, don't fail me."

She hung up the receiver with a sigh of relief.

"To think of falling back on Larry whom I used to consider a light-weight. He is my last ditch, and then I'm off by the overhill and skyville route. In the meantime I'll make some manuscript memoirs to leave behind."

A note to Marta and a shorter one to Jo occupied but a few moments time, but she wrote swiftly and steadily for an hour on a longer one. When she had a bulky package she sealed it and addressed it to Kurt. An explanatory letter to Mrs. Kingdon then followed.

"I'll have to travel light — a beach com-

ber's outfit," she thought as she prepared for departure.

She gave the notes for Jo and Marta to Agatha to be delivered on their return. She had a few moments confidential conversation with Francis, bade the others good-bye and then sped down the road to Westcott's.

CHAPTER XIII

Agatha came out to the driveway to stop the buckboard and deliver the notes.

Marta read the one handed to her as they drove on to the stables.

"What 'tis, honey," Jo asked in alarm, as he reined up and turned to her.

There was a wild, distraught look in Marta's eyes, and her face had suddenly turned very pale.

"Oh, Jo! Pen—"

"Wait!" he cautioned, as Gene came out of the stable.

"Unhook for me, will you, Gene?" he asked.

"Now, Marta, what is it?" he again asked anxiously as they were walking back to the house.

"Read your letter, Jo, and see what it says."

He read aloud:

"DEAR JO: Leaving Top Hill forever by the Excelsior Route. Had to. Never go back on Little Marta. Will see you somewhere, sometime. At four this afternoon, come to Westcott's red-roofed barn and get Francis' wheel.

"Yours,

"PENNY ANTE."

"What has happened to send her off in such sky-rocket fashion?" he asked. "What did she say to you?"

"Jo, we must find her at once. Let's go to Westcott's the quickest way we can."

"What is it, Marta?"

"That Mr. Hebler who is visiting here, you know," said Marta breathlessly. "Well, he missed a diamond ring. He left it on a table near his door — I saw it. When we came back from our walk last night, I went to Miss Lamont's room. His door was open.

A great whopping diamond ring was on the table — and — "

"Yes, Marta," he said encouragingly, as she paused.

"When she found it was gone, she told Mr. Walters and Mr. Hebler that *she* took it, so as to protect me. That's why she has gone."

"She's a trump! Read me her note, Marta."

"DEAR LITTLE MARTA:

"You must do just as I say. I told Mr. Walters and Mr. Hebler I took the ring. Give it to Mr. Hebler and tell him I left it with you to hand to him. Never do it again, Marta. Jo is worth a whole mine of diamonds. When I am safely and far away, will let you hear from me.

"With love,

"PEN."

"Some girl!" exclaimed Jo. "But she

isn't as keen as I thought, or she'd have known you didn't take the ring."

"Jo, do you believe — "

"Shucks, honey! I know you didn't. I wouldn't believe you did if I saw you take it. Here, little girl — "

He stopped, put his arm around her, lifted the little face and kissed the tears from it. "What's matter with you?"

"Jo, I didn't take it!"

"Don't I know you didn't, honey!"

"It's nice in you to know it, Jo. But — suppose, I had taken it — "

"I'd have given it back and rustled around till I could have bought you the biggest diamond in Chicago."

"Who do you suppose did take it, Jo?"

"I don't know. Maybe he never lost it."

"Wasn't it grand in her to take the blame?"

"Yes," he admitted grudgingly, "but I don't like her thinking you took it."

"But, Jo. Of course she would think it

was I, and — I remember now — when I saw that diamond I thought how easy it would be for anyone to lift it, and then when I was in her room, I hardly heard a word she said because I was thinking, 'It's Jo! It's Jo's love that's made me different,' and then I got scared thinking that I might want to take it, and how awful it would have been if I had never met you and loved you. I got up and walked right out of the room so I could be alone and think about you. It must have looked queer to her the way I acted — till she found the ring had been taken."

"I'll see Kurt," said Jo, "and tell him about it, and he will find her."

"What's that sound?" interrupted Marta, looking about her in a puzzled way. "I've heard it before somewhere. Oh, I know! It's an airship."

They looked up and, for the moment, lost all interest in things below.

"Holy Smoke!" exclaimed Jo. "First

one I ever saw! Gene said there was one in town a few days ago. Look! It's coming down corkscrew style! It's going to land there by Westcott's!"

CHAPTER XIV

Down the road from the corral, Kurt chugged homeward in his crude little car. He had the manner of one whose heart is heavy, but whose resolution was still invincible.

A strange unaccustomed sound, a faint, far-away buzzing made him glance upward. Two sharp winged points were skimming through the air. He felt a thrill — the thrill of the unknown. He knew it must be one of the craft, foreign as yet to the hill country. In the distance he saw it swirl, loop and maneuver, spiral gracefully downward, skim the earth lightly, rise again and then descend from sight hidden by one of the hills.

In a few moments he saw it ascending again. It passed over him — so high up that it seemed but of bird size.

He was startled — lifted momentarily and dazedly from his plodding existence.

He had read of these ships of the air, but their reality had not been borne in on him until now.

He went on to the house. Three children rushed at him with football fury.

"Attaboy!" he cried, catching up Billy. "What is it?"

"Mother is in town with father and Mr. Hebler. Father just telephoned — "

Kurt had the feeling of something lifted — of help at hand.

"And," continued Francis placidly, "father said you were to take us to town in the big car and we'll all have dinner at the hotel and come back together. And he said to bring Aunt Pen. But you can't now."

"Run up to her room, Francis, and tell her I want to speak to her."

"Aunt Pen has gone," said the boy soberly.

"Gone! When — where?"

"I don't know. She kissed us good-bye and she gave me a letter to give to you at dinner time."

"Give it to me now, Francis."

"No; she said she trusted me, and I told her I wouldn't give it to you till she said."

"Come with me, Francis," said Kurt, drawing him away from the other children. "I want to talk to you as man to man. We must always protect women, you know. Your Aunt Pen went away because she thought it best for her. It isn't best. Your mother is her best friend, and if she had been here, she wouldn't have let her go. If I had the letter, you see, I might be able to find where she had gone. Then I could ask her to come back."

Francis looked up at him oddly and said in his little, old-man fashion:

"Maybe it would be *best,* but father says that a real man never breaks his word to a woman."

Kurt flushed slightly.

"I take off my hat to you, Francis. You are right."

Not believing that Pen would start out on foot, he went down to the garage. The cars were all accounted for. A visit to the stables proved the same as to the horses.

On his way back to the house, he met Betty, who said to him in a stage whisper.

"Uncle Kurt, Aunt Penny is going to France. She went by way of Westcott's. Is that the way to France? Don't tell Francis I told. She is going to help the French and the *Beligum* babies."

"Thank you very much, Betty."

This was a clue. She had doubtless started toward Westcott's expecting to get a lift to town. If no one had picked her up en route, he could easily overtake her in the big car, which Gene had now repaired.

"Go and tell the boys to get ready, Betty."

Betty sped gleefully away.

"Oh, Mr. Walters!" hailed Mrs. Merlin, coming from the house, "when you see Mr.

Hebler, tell him I put his diamond ring away. I'm awfully forgetful. I—"

"You put his diamond ring away? Where?" asked Kurt faintly.

"It was like this. I couldn't get to sleep last night because a window was rattling in the hall, so I got up and went out to fix it. When I passed by Mr. Hebler's door, I saw his diamond ring on a table near the door. Ain't it awful how careless folks are! I opened a drawer in the table and slipped it in, and I clean forgot all about it till a little while ago. Maybe he's got it on by this time, though."

"All right, Mrs. Merlin, I'll tell him," said Kurt, hastily going in and up to Hebler's room. The diamond fairly blazed at him in accusation as he opened the drawer.

And yet Hebler had told him that he had the ring! He hadn't been in the house after he had said the ring was missing. And why had Pen said she took it? Maybe she had taken that method of returning it.

He went downstairs, pondering over the mystery. This time Marta stopped him, excitedly.

"Oh, Mr. Walters, Jo and I have been looking for you! Miss Lamont didn't take the ring."

"I know she didn't. I just learned, Marta, that Mrs. Merlin saw it on the table and put it away."

"Find Miss Lamont and tell her!" cried Marta in distress. "You see she thought I took it. She had reason to think so — the way I acted. She was protecting me."

"I see," he said despairingly. "I made her think you had taken it."

"Come outside and see Jo."

"Jo," he asked desperately, when he had joined him, "do you know where she is? She has gone. I must know."

"Kurt, you might as well try to catch a piece of quicksilver as Penny Ante, if she don't want to be caught."

"Have you the slightest idea as to where

she has gone or where she might have gone?"

"Maybe I could venture a guess. I'll have to know first why you want to know."

Something more compelling than any emotion he had yet known kept down the anger that otherwise would have risen at being thwarted.

"I love her, Jo," he said quietly.

"For how long, Kurt, have you loved her?"

"Since the first night I met her," he said slowly and reminiscently. "When we camped on the trail. She lay asleep in the moonlight."

"Have you forgotten what you warned me against that day I told you about Marta — about marrying a thief."

"I was a simp, then, Jo. I had never been in love."

"Well," pursued Jo, "why didn't you tell her you loved her in the first place? Maybe it would have helped. It isn't much of a

compliment to a girl to hang around and not say anything."

"Think, Jo. I supposed until Marta came, that Pen was *your* girl. I brought her up here to see if she could be reformed for *you*. I sent you away to Westcott's until I could tell if she were worthy of you."

"Say, Kurt, I am the simp. I never thought of that. She didn't think you really cared. Leave it to me. I'll tell her."

"But where is she? Don't let the boys know, but Betty leaked the fact that she was going to France. I can't think she was in earnest."

Jo whistled.

"I am beginning to get glimpses on a dark subject. I'll bet that is where he is making for, too."

"He? Who?" he asked quickly. "Hebler?"

"Hebler! She'd rather dodge him than you. No; I mean that aviator who landed over toward Westcott's a little while ago.

I heard one of those fliers had been in town giving an exhibition. He was down to earth just about long enough to pick some one up. That was what she meant in the note she left for me when she said she was going by the Excelsior route."

"How would she know him, and how would she get word to him to come out here?"

"She told me she spent the day in town — let me see — day before yesterday, I think it was. Said she met a man there she used to know."

"She told me, too, she had been to town, but I thought she was only joking. I didn't believe her."

"There's a lot you could hear about her, Kurt, that you wouldn't believe right off the bat; but it's not me who's going to put you wise. Talk to Mrs. Kingdon about her. You'll not get the chance to interview Penny Ante very soon, I imagine. In the craft she must be traveling in, there's nothing

about this ranch that can overtake her, but I'll do my level best. Let me see! She won't go to town. She'll want to keep out of Hebler's reach, of course."

"Why?" asked Kurt. "Do you know?"

"I know more than you do about her. A girl has to have some one to confide in and Little Penny Ante chose me. You scared her out, you know."

Kurt winced.

"They will naturally go in an opposite direction," pursued Jo. "They may fly over to the next station and take the east-bound. I'll take your car."

"No; you take the children to town, and I'll go in pursuit —"

"That'll never do. She won't try to dodge me."

CHAPTER XV

In the little valley by Westcott's, Pen stood waiting and staring upward. At last she heard the sharp sound of an engine and saw the plane describing a sweeping circle. It came gently down, the little wheels rolling along the grass.

"I'm in debt to Hebler," said Larry. "It was only your fear of him that overcame your fear of flying."

Then looking at her, he continued, confidingly, "I wouldn't take up the average girl, Pen, and especially one who owned up to being afraid. But I know you. You'll forget fear in the thrills. All you've got to do is to sit still, hold on and look out on the level. We won't do any swivels; just straight stuff, and you'll be as safe as you would any place."

She put on the hood and goggles and was adjusted to the seat.

"Now where do you want to go?" he asked.

"Anywhere to lose myself. Hebby is in town and so — are others. Let us take the opposite direction and you can land me at some place where the east-bound stops and I can get some more luggage. Then we'll make plans."

"Suits me. First thing we'll do is to have a grand flight. Then I'll leave you at a nice, little, sky-high inn I know up in the clouds. I'll fly back to town, pay my bill, pack my traps and join you by train."

He started the engine. The plane skipped along for a few paces, then arose, it seemed to Pen, to great and dizzy heights. In spite of her instructions she ventured to look down. Everything earthly was disappearing. They dodged the clouds, went above them and then slid down to the splendors of the sunlight. Over the hills at full speed they swept along, Larry's air-wise, lightning-swift sensibilities making naught of change

of currents and drafts. Then came the joy and thrill of a sixty-mile straightaway spurt.

It was wonderful, but the most wonderful part of it to Pen was that she had not even a second of fear, although always this thought of being shot up suddenly straight into an unknown realm had been most terrifying.

Up there above the hills and in the clouds, she felt entranced, spiritualized. It was with a feeling of depression that she saw they were spinning down until they hovered over a field, scudding smoothly and slowly along.

"You weren't afraid!" exclaimed Larry triumphantly, as they walked along toward a little inn resting at the base of one of the undulating hills.

"No;" she answered, "only awed."

"Was it anything like you expected?"

"No," she replied.

A man came out of the inn to meet them.

"Halloa, Larry! Too bad I couldn't have

had a full house to see. The last tourist left on the train to-day."

"Then you'll have more room for us. This is Miss Lamont, Nat. Mr. Yates, the proprietor," he explained to Pen. "Can you give us supper and put Miss Lamont up for the night? I have to fly back to my hotel. I'll return by train in the morning."

"Sure thing! House is yours."

He showed Pen to a neat little room and told her "supper'd be on in a jiffy."

She sat down dazedly. Presently she was roused to her surroundings by Larry's "Oh, Pen!" from below.

When she came down to the dining-room, Larry's clear young eyes looked at her keenly.

"Not down to earth yet, Pen? I know how you feel. First time I made the sky route, I went off by myself for a day."

"Larry, I can't talk about it yet. I will tell you now why I joined you. I thought I would like to go to France — with you. I

thought I might be useful some way, but now — "

"We won't think of plans now. We'll talk it all over in the morning when I am back. You'll be safe here. Nat would as lief shoot Hebby or anyone else who trailed you. Supper's on the table, so come on."

Throughout the meal Larry did most of the talking, Pen scarcely responding. Then he was off, steering in great circles toward town, Pen watching with the quickening of pulse and a renewal of the elation she had felt when taking the air. When he was but a mere speck in the sky, she went up to her little room.

"You'll never look quite so high or so wonderful to me again," she thought, as she looked out on the hills. "It's because I've looked down on you, I suppose — the law of contrast. I learned a great deal up there — in the vapors. I put out my feelers, something I never did before. I see I've always faked my sensations. But my wings are

pin feathers as yet. I have to look at everything from a new angle of vision. All my life I've been longing for thrills — real thrills, my own thrills; not other peoples. I had a few little shivers when I was riding to Top Hill that morning; a few more last night — but my first true thrill of rapture came when I was challenging the sky, an argonaut."

It was a hard struggle for Pen to adjust her new self that she had found up in the high altitudes where all the tepid, petty things of life had dropped from her — where she had found the famous fleece, the truth. In the vastness of that uncharted land, like a flash in the dark something had leaped at her. Her dream of a dream had come true. She had learned the great human miracle, the meaning of a love that had the strength to renounce. A god-made love, sweet and strong, conceived on earth, but brought forth on high where the call of destiny had sounded with clarion clearness. She knew now what

she had missed; that he was not of the world of miniature men who exact and never return.

She was roused from her visions of the new and radiant world which had been opened unto her by a knock at her door.

"Yes," she answered vaguely.

"There's a man downstairs to see you," said the proprietor.

She was at once alert and on the defensive, thinking of an encounter with Hebler.

"Do you know who he is?" she asked apprehensively.

"He said to tell you 'twas Jo."

Joyfully she hastened down to the deserted office of the little inn.

"Jo, I am so glad it's you!"

"So am I. Come outside and take a walk with me."

"How did you ever track me up here, Jo?" she asked as they walked up a hillside.

"Not hard to track the first skycraft that ever came up to these parts. I saw one land

near Westcott's, and I had a hunch it was lighting for you. Then I thought no more about it until things happened that made it up to me to find you. I inquired around and about and found a big balloon had come this way, so I figured this was about your goal for a train."

"Why was it up to you to find me, Jo?"

"Well, Miss Penny Ante, I am a little interested in you, seeing as it was you who brought Marta to me. And I knew you would be interested in knowing Marta didn't take the ring."

"Oh, Jo! I tried to think it wasn't Marta, but —"

"She says she acted just as though she had taken it. It was old Merlin, nosing around the hall, who tucked it away. But the real reason I had to run you down was for my pal. He wants you."

"Why?" she asked. "To apologize? You didn't tell him, Jo —"

"I told him nothing."

"Then he must want me as an ex-sheriff."

"Cut that out, Miss Penny Ante. He wants to find you because he loves you."

"What makes you think so, Jo?"

"He 'fessed up when he found you had gone."

"He didn't love me — not as you love Marta," she reminded him. "It made no difference with you that Marta —"

He made a quick gesture of protest.

"You forget," he said soberly, "that when I met Marta and fell in love with her, I didn't know about — her. Bender had told him about you before he met you, and then he thought you belonged to me."

"Jo, if you had known Marta stole before you met her, wouldn't you have loved her and asked her to marry you?"

"I don't know," he said frankly, "and I don't care about 'might have beens.' I know I love her now and always shall. That is enough."

"Miss Penny Ante," he continued, as she

did not answer him, "you don't know Kurt Walters as I do. He is a square man, square as a die."

"Yes, Jo," she said softly. "He is a real man — a square man. I know it now, too late."

"Not too late. Not if you care. Go back with me to the ranch. He has gone to town with the children to meet the Kingdons. Mrs. Kingdon is there, too. They will all be back to-night."

"No, Jo; it's too late."

"Why?"

"Because I gave Francis a letter telling him everything. He might overlook what he did know, but I understand his pride. He'll never overlook the other. He'll not forgive the deception."

"Go to him unexpectedly, Miss Penny Ante. A man off guard, you know. Come back to Top Hill with me."

"No; I am going to wait here until Larry comes back. I must."

"Who is he, and what is he to you?" asked Jo resentfully and suspiciously.

"So you see, Jo," she said, when she had finished a brief account of Larry's entrance into her life, "I can't go back with you. Don't tell anyone but Marta where you found me. Ask her to forgive me for being so stupid about the ring. I'll walk down to your car with you."

They walked slowly without speaking until they came to the inn. She looked at the car wistfully.

"I haven't been in this poor, little old car since that first ride to Top Hill," she said reminiscently.

He made no reply, but got into the car and put his hand on the wheel.

"Jo!"

"Well," he answered in the tone of one balked in his intentions.

"He'll get over it."

"No; men like Kurt don't get over anything like that. I know what it is to love

without hope. I am sorry for Kurt. You'll be sorry for him, too, some day."

She had come close to the car, and he looked into her eyes as he said impressively:

"He loved you from that very first night."

"That very first night!" she echoed. "Not surely on that ride from town — from jail to Top Hill! Why, he fairly hated me then!"

"You're not hep to Kurt," he declared. "He said to me in just these words: 'I have loved her since that first night I saw her, when we camped on the trail — when she lay asleep in the moonlight.'"

After making this enlightening remark, he motored away, while Pen stood motionless with the shock of amazement in her eyes.

* * *

When Larry returned on the early eastbound, he found Pen on the veranda of the little inn.

"Why, Pen!" he exclaimed. "Is this a stay-up late, or a get-up early?"

"Both, Larry. I couldn't sleep. I am still thinking of our flight up — where I found myself."

"I know," he said comprehendingly. "You have to get away from people and things to do that — to get the right line on yourself; and that is the only place you can do it. But I met a man at the hotel who knows you."

"Not Hebby!"

"No; I dodged Hebby for fear he'd quizz me or follow me. This other man began a cross exam., so I beat it. He said he was from the ranch where you stopped. I asked the clerk when I paid my bill who he was, and he said he was a sheriff, or had been one. Maybe Hebler got him to track you. I dodged his questions so as not to put him wise."

"He isn't a colleague of Hebby's," denied Pen. "He is the foreman of the ranch where I stayed. I think he was there in town to meet the Kingdons."

"He met some people who went out to the

ranch, but this man stayed on at the hotel. The night clerk said he would be there until noon to-day. We had better get ready for the next train."

"I am ready," said Pen quietly.

CHAPTER XVI

To the delight of his young passengers Kurt drove at a speed never before attempted when they were with him. At the hotel there was a rallying reunion of the Top Hill family.

"Where is Pen?" Mrs. Kingdon was finally permitted to ask.

"She didn't come with us," said Kurt, grimly enjoying Hebler's quick attention. The children had been previously and carefully coached to make no mention of Pen's departure.

He made an excuse to leave the hotel parlor and went down to the office.

"Is there an aviator registered here?" he asked the clerk.

"Sure there is," replied the clerk proudly. "Larry Lamont. Some flier, too. He's going over to France soon — into the French service."

Lamont! Kurt turned a little pale. "Is he here now?"

"His things are here, but he's out with his aeroplane somewhere."

Kurt breathed a little easier and resolved to remain at the hotel until the aviator should return.

When the rest of the party came through the office on their way to the dining-room, Francis lagged behind and handed Kurt a letter which the latter abstractedly slipped into his pocket.

At dinner he was seated at the end of the table farthest removed from Mrs. Kingdon, so he had no opportunity for a word with her in regard to Pen. As they were going out from dinner she called to him:

"The children are clamoring for a movie. They don't get many opportunities to see one, and I haven't the heart to refuse them their first request after my long absence. So we are all going. Will you come, too?"

"I can't, I fear. I have a little matter of

business to attend to, but I will be here after the picture show."

"I imagine we will not be back very soon. Billy always insists on seeing a picture twice at least."

Kurt remained in the office when the others had gone. Presently the clerk said to him: "Here comes Lamont now!"

A slim, graceful-looking young man smoking a cigarette was just swinging in from the street.

Instantly Kurt went forward to meet him.

"Mr. Lamont?" he asked.

"Yes," admitted the aviator warily.

"My name is Walters. I'm from the ranch where Miss Lamont has been visiting. Are you her brother?"

Lamont shook the ashes from his cigarette.

"I beg your pardon," he replied coldly. "I have no sister."

He passed on, leaving Kurt still at sea as to the relationship of the aviator and Pen.

Then he heard Lamont addressing the clerk.

"I want to leave an early call for the first east-bound."

Kurt went out on the street. He could always think more clearly in the open, and he felt that he had much need for thought. Added to his other disturbing emotions was the most stinging one of jealousy. The truth that struck home was the knowledge that the supposed theft of the ring hadn't made him so wretched as the assurance that she loved another — was another's. He hadn't been jealous before — not of Jo nor even of Hebler, but he instinctively felt that this Romeo-like youth whom she had sought was the one who had the first claim.

"He shall not have her!" he muttered when he had walked the streets for some time. "I'll take her from him — from everyone."

He went to the little theatre to tell the Kingdons that he should remain in town all night. Kingdon could drive the car home and Hebler could run the racer.

He walked into the little lobby. The bill

boards showed him it was a wild and wholly western scenario, and he felt certain that no less than two performances would satisfy Billy's cravings. He went inside and stood scanning the well-filled house until he located his little party well up in front — children's choice of seats. He started down the aisle. The preliminary pictures of the cast were being shown. On the screen flashed the lines:

THE THIEF
or
MEG O' THE PRAIRIES
By Bobbie Burr

A picture of "Meg O' the Prairies" followed. Kurt turned and walked back to the last row of seats, the only ones vacant.

The theatre was dark. An improvised orchestra was essaying something that sounded like strains of Dixie, Columbia, America and the Star-Spangled Banner combined, and the audience were continually

standing up and sitting down, in a state of bewilderment and doubt as to which was the national air.

Then suddenly on the white screen was enacted the regulation, popular style of Western play. Ranch settings, tough bar-room, inevitable cowboys, bandits, Indians, and lovers twain, held the audience enthralled. There were the many hair-breadth escapes, pursuits, timely rescues featuring the one girl, daughter of a ranchman, attired in semi-cowboy regalia, who rode like mad and performed all kinds of wonderful feats, and for whose hand the hero, villain and cowboys hazarded their lives and fortunes. The old, old picture that came with the first film and will last while there are boys and men with the hearts of boys. Look upon it tenderly, promoters of educational pictures and uplifting reels, for it carries a romance never attained in reality and irresistibly appeals to the idealism of young blood and young hearts.

For an instant, when the first picture of

" The Thief " was thrown on the screen, Kurt felt a queer sensation as one who intuitively perceives something of danger in the dark. A swift, warning note like a sharp pain struck him.

With tense nerves, he waited for the scenes in which she would appear. All the little well-remembered gestures, the graceful movements, the tender graces which he had been wont to steel himself against were there. They brought him a feeling that was exquisite in its pain. With no outward show of emotion his whole being quivered and throbbed at each appearance of the boyish figure ever recurring on the screen.

Once her eyes, wistful and entreating, seemed to meet his in mute reproach. Then the little theater was lighted, the improvised orchestra renewed its efforts. He went quickly out and stopped at the hotel to leave a note for Kingdon. Again he walked and lost himself in memories, seeing as in a mirror all the incidents that had so intrigued his

interest, but which now in the light of his new understanding seemed so very patent.

Suddenly he recalled her letter still unread. That might show some motive for her incognito and explain her arrest by Bender.

He returned to the hotel. The hour was very late. He learned that the ranch party had long since departed and that Larry Lamont had gone to his room.

With a queer little catch of expectancy in his throat, he held the letter for a moment pressed tight in his hand. Then he opened it.

"To KURT WALTERS, EX-ACTING SHERIFF.

"In taking *French* leave, I feel that it is due you to inform you who your prisoner really is.

"I was to the stage born. In fact, nearly stage-born, as my mother played her part almost up to the night I made my debut in the great game of Life. My childhood was spent mostly in the flies, and my earliest memories are of being propped up on an impromptu,

triangular divan formed by a piece of wood stuck between two joists and covered with cushions; of watching my mother use lip stick and other make-up things; of hearing the warning knock and admonition: 'Thirty minutes, Miss Lamont;' (No 'Mrs.' in stage lore, you know) and later, 'Fifteen minutes Miss Lamont;' of her cheery response, 'Yes, Parks,' and of her never hurrying or being flustered by the flight of time; of her giving me a sticky kiss as the final peremptory call came. Everyone in the company mothered me, so I was not neglected — doubtless received too much attention. I was a very nimble kidlet, and at an early age the stage carpenter, who had once been in a circus, taught me to walk a taut rope and to perform acrobatic feats.

"In due course I played juvenile leads. When I attained the young and tender grass age, I was sent away to school, my mother having been a shrewd manager and investor. The school was equipped with a fine gym-

nasium; riding and dancing academies were attached. In all of these institutions I excelled.

"When I was sixteen, my mother died, and I went on the stage. I didn't inherit her talent as an actress, having only mediocre ability, but I had a carrying voice, personality, and could dance, so I soon left the legitimate stage for vaudeville where I made something like a hit.

"Bruce Hebler, who is a motion picture man, persuaded me to come into film land, and if you didn't live at the end of the trail and forego all things that make good cheer, you might have recognized me from billboard pictures and magazine pages as the star of certain woolly West productions. Jo recognized me at once as Bobbie Burr.

"This spring I was a bit under the weather, because we really have to work like dogs and some of our daring stunts — which are not always faked — do get on our nerves, you see. I had to have a vacation, after which I needed

another, and was advised to seek recuperation in your hills. My objective point was one hundred or more miles from here at a sort of little isolated inn. En route I missed connections, and having no enthusiasm about my destination, I stayed over in the town nearest Top Hill. In a local paper I read of the arrest of a 'hardened young criminal.' I was curious to see what species of my sex that might be, and followed my impulse to visit her at the jail. Your friend, Bender, gave me permission to visit the 'hardened young criminal.' She was a girl of my own age, size, and altogether what I or any girl could easily have been had it not been for the accident of birth, conditions and environment.

"Fortunately she was an admirer of Bobbie Burr, and I won her confidence and story — Marta's story, which you already know. Things and people had made her put up a bluff of being hardened, but there had come, as you know, the newly awakened desire to 'live straight — like folks who didn't get

caught.' To use her own words, 'she wasn't going to let a grand man like *him* wish himself on such as me.' I felt, then, that thief or no thief, she was the real thing. I only knew one way to get her release and I was rather keen for adventure. We exchanged dress skirts, shoes, hats and coats. I gave her some money, the key to my hotel room, trunk and suit-case and told her to take the next train out while the going was good, and not to show up at the hotel until the night clerk, who had not seen me, came on. I also gave her a letter to some good friends of mine in a town farther west. I knew they would be kind to her, ask no questions and let her stay until she was squared about.

"It was done on an impulse — in a flash — one of those kaleidoscopic impulses we have, but back of it was the wish to help some one, and the curiosity to see if her love, aided by the opportunity, would suffice to reform the kind of girl she was supposed to be.

"She left the jail in my outer clothes, and

I stayed in her shabby garments. Old Bender never suspected the transfer. It would have been very easy for me with my agility gained in screen stunts to have swung out from any part of that old jail, and still easier to have given you the slip en route to Top Hill, but I wanted Marta to have plenty of time to get to a far cover before the mistake was discovered.

"Playing a part was second nature to me. I really felt that for the time being I was Marta, but a different Marta from the real one. I always enter into my roles with all my being, so I set the role of a real thief for myself and played up to it so intently that I all but lost my own personality. It was the kind of Marta that Bender supposed her to be who talked to you on that memorable ride to Top Hill. Your wish to be helpful to an unfortunate girl touched me and might have won me to confiding in you, but you were so stern and sometimes so repellant in your manner, I was afraid to trust you. I wasn't sure

you would be equal to rising above your chagrin at finding you had been taken in by a 'movie actress' and that you might apprehend poor little Marta.

"By morning I was curious to know your idea of 'the best woman in the world.' Then, too, I thought I could find my needed tonic in your hills and better accommodations than I could obtain at a hotel. So I continued to play my part. When I saw Mrs. Kingdon, I realized she *was* the best woman in the world. She, like Jo, recognized me at once, having seen me rehearsing in San Francisco. I had the whim to stay incognito and she humored me, insisting, however, that you should be told the next day. But the next day you had gone. In the week that followed I learned the beauty of a home life, hitherto unknown to me.

"Of course those stunts you saw me doing on field day were mere 'horse play' compared with what I have to do in making the pictures. When I met you for a brief space of

time that afternoon, I had no opportunity to make my disclosure. When you returned, Mrs. Kingdon was away and I couldn't resist the temptation to play on in my new part. Any one's personality seems more pleasing to me than my own, and I still felt as if I were really Marta.

"My early ideals of manly suitors were patterned slightly on your model; it piqued me, I admit, that you didn't seem to fall for a little romance with me, as many suitors had done.

"When I saved Francis from being thrown (I've turned that trick many a time in pictures) I felt that I had in a way repaid Mrs. Kingdon for her hospitality. You were so homey and nice that night, I almost 'fessed up. I did my best to make you care more — and I thought I had succeeded; but you still made reservations and I thought your reluctance came from my past — Marta's past —

"That night as I stood at my window vaguely regretting my deception, Jo came

along. I flew down to him and told him that I had heard from Marta, and we had a nice long talk together. I told him she was living 'straight,' but I respected her wish not to let him know where she was.

"I don't know why, as time went on, I didn't tell you who I was. Maybe it was natural perversity, or the fateful habit of playing a part.

"I ran away to town that day you were all absent and met Larry Lamont, my cousin, the only kinsman I have. He was once a harum-scarum lad and did some flying acts for a company I was with, and one day when he was laid off for 'reasons,' I gave him a calling down and advised him to go to an aviation school and learn to fly scientifically. I hadn't heard from him until I saw him at the hotel, and found he had made good and joined the flying service of France.

"Marta's unexpected arrival upset things. I knew that Mrs. Kingdon was interested in my account of her and in her love for Jo;

also that she intended to help them eventually, but I did not know she had communicated with Marta during her own absence. Hebler's sudden appearance was the last straw. He insists I am under contract for another of the wild and woolly pictures I am so tired of playing. I am not posted on the legality of contracts, and it seemed easier to dodge him until he should have to secure some one else. You were very nice about offering to help me evade him. Some way the return of Marta and the sudden arrival of Hebler made me realize I had been playing a part. That night in the library when you told me you loved me and asked me to marry you, I was really myself. I was surprised by the discovery that you loved me; but I wasn't sure of my own feelings. I felt I must think more about it, so pursuing my usual tactics I ran away.

"On passing Hebby's door, that gaudy diamond flashed before me. I'll leave the theft an unsolved mystery.

"When I was forced to reveal my presence

to Hebler, I felt that I had balled things up hopelessly and that the only avenue of escape lay in flight — my long suit.

"My only solace in all this bungling mess I have made is that I have brought Jo and Marta together.

"With you at the ranch and Hebler in town, I don't know how I could make my get-away but for Larry. I have telephoned him and he is to meet me near here, and by the time my little carrier dove delivers this, I shall be en route — for France. I'm weary of movies, and life is a delusion anyway.

"I admit it was wrong to deceive you — after the necessity for so doing had passed. You were kind — in intent; still, you might have been a wee bit nicer, don't you think?

"Regretfully,

"PENELOPE."

"P. S. Does it hurt *now* that I use your mother's name?"

He read this letter as one who dreams and

is but half conscious that it is a dream. He read it again and again, each time grasping bit by bit the realization of its contents and what they meant to him.

"She was right," he thought. "I didn't know what love meant. I do now — now that I missed it. I've lost her more surely than if she were a 'hardened, young criminal.' I shall never try to find her."

It was hardly sunrise when he went down to the office.

"I should like to speak to Mr. Lamont when he comes down," he said to the clerk.

"He has gone," was the reply. "He came down before his call and has gone to the train."

"Maybe it is just as well," thought Kurt. "There is really no message I could send to her."

"See the picture last night?" asked the clerk chattily. "The Thief, or Meg O' The Prairies. Great picture!"

"Yes; I saw it," replied Kurt dismally.

"I always go to see Bobbie Burr. She's my favorite. There was a girl here the other day who was a dead ringer for her. She had dinner with Lamont here. I read in a magazine that she gets a big salary. I forget the figures, but it was more per week than some folks earn in a lifetime."

Kurt's heart registered more downward beats.

He hung about the office until the dining-room was open and then went in and perfunctorily consumed some food. Later he called up an acquaintance and asked the loan of his car. It was sent around to the hotel, and he was just about to start for the ranch when a well-known voice behind him said:

"May I ride out to Top Hill with you?"

For a moment the blood left his heart and then returned so rapidly it left him quite pale.

"Larry said you were here. I came back on the train just now. I want to go to the ranch for — my things. Will you take me?"

"Yes," he said abstractedly.

CHAPTER XVII

"Kurt!"

He looked up with a start. As on that first ride, long ago, his eyes had been fixed on the road ahead.

"Let's talk a bit," she said. "What did you think—"

"I was such a fool," he replied bitterly. "I should have known that you were not what you pretended you were. You must believe me when I tell you that I loved you from that first night we were up here in the hills. I didn't know how great my love was, though, until I knew I had lost you."

"I thought, or tried to think, you should have known I was not a thief," said Pen, with a soft tone in her voice, "but Larry said that only showed what a good actress I am. I told Larry all about it this morning, and he said no self-respecting man would ask a thief

to marry him, not if he knew she was a thief before he loved her."

"I didn't read your letter," he said, "until after I had seen the picture of 'The Thief' last night. So I was prepared for its contents. I read, and not entirely between the lines, that you did not care."

"I didn't think I did — so much — " she answered, "when I wrote that letter; but up there, Kurt, up in the clouds yesterday — something within me unlatched, and I knew that I loved you, and that my love would make you forgive me for deceiving you. You will?"

"I will. But you see there is a greater obstacle than that — or in the thought that you were a thief."

"You mean my being a movie actress. Are you so prejudiced against the profession?"

"The obstacle is that the clerk of the hotel told me he had read somewhere that Bobbie Burr received a stupenduous salary."

"Well, don't you think she earns it?"

"You see, a poor foreman of a ranch would never have the hardihood to ask a rich girl to marry him; he'd a thousand times rather marry a poor thief."

"Is that the only obstacle?" she asked.

"It is, and it is unsurmountable."

He was silent, and in his deep-set eyes she read the resolve he had made.

"That is an obstacle that soon can be vanquished. I am a good spender, and I will soon make way with all I have. I am looking for a good investment. Mr. Kingdon or Jo or some one told me Westcott's was for sale. You see, we might run it fifty-fifty. I could buy it and you run it."

"I can't, Pen," he said desperately.

She made no reply.

The car whipped round the curves. She was watching the long efficient hands gripping the wheel. Then she stole a glance at his grim, thrust-forward profile. She felt that something must be done and she was a believer in the power of action over words.

She scanned the side of the road keenly for a way, and when she recognized the memorable little clump of trees, she spoke in plaintive tone.

"Aren't we going to stop at all, Mr. Sheriff Man?"

Instinctively he stopped the car.

She climbed out and went toward the trees. As in a dream he mechanically followed her.

"Do you remember our camping place that night?" she asked.

"Do I remember? If you knew how I battled with my best and strongest feeling that night!"

"Kurt, you know in the library at Top Hill last night — no, night before last, you asked me something. I didn't answer. I will answer now. Kurt, I love you! Now will you ask me — the rest of it?"

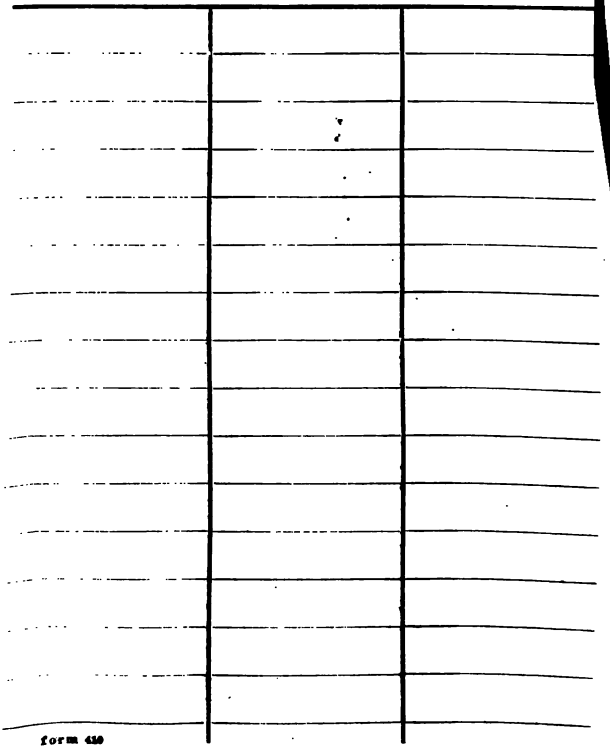
"Penelope!"

"Oh! You do — care — Kurt. Your mother's name!"

THE END.

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
REFERENCE DEPARTMENT

This book is under no circumstances to be taken from the Building



form 418